

## Exploring Naga Identity through Memory in Easterine Kire's *Mari*

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### Abstract

The arena of Memory Studies encompasses the fields encompasses various strands of memory, culture, and history. The dimensions of history are explored through the lens of memory. The novel *Mari* (2010) deals with the rise of conflict in Kohima and how it affected the survivors. The paper intends to explore *Mari* as a Naga repository of memory and the history of their past. The center of the study is on the function of memory in the creation of the identity of the protagonist of the novel *Mari*. This study aims to examine the socio-cultural and political scenario in Nagaland and the Japanese invasion that resulted in the Battle. In addition, this study intends to show how an individual can serve as a mode of remembering cultural identity and further lead in the making of the cultural identity of the community. The novel elucidates the themes mentioned above. Thus, the study wants to show how the individual represents the collective as well as cultural memories of the experience of the War. The study intelligently interrogates the concept of Cultural Memory with respect to the Naga consciousness.

**Keywords:** Cultural Memory, History, Memory, Nagaland, War

### Introduction

The arena of literature from India's Nagaland is less touched upon. The people and the literature from the arena have always been a subject of the unacknowledged part and past of India. The development of the historical, political, and cultural changes as well as the changing dynamics in Nagaland has been well represented by authors such as Avinuo Kire, Easterine Kire, Nini Lungalang, Temsula Ao, and others who have dealt with the problems of subjugation and silence in the periphery. Contemporary Naga Literature tracks down the conflicted Naga history and its various cultural, political, and historical aspects. Some other non-literary attempts include the building of memorials and monuments of War Cemetery, World War II Museum and Cremation Memorial in Nagaland suggesting a notion of Communal and National memory but these efforts were not acknowledged or recognized well by the rest of the country and the Nagas felt a feeling of otherness. Braja Bihari Kumar in his *Naga Identity* (2005) also states that "The composite Naga identity is of recent origin and it lacks claimed historical

support" (20). Literature crosses boundaries and combines disciplines, genres, and forms. Memory and History are not necessarily opposite but can be seen in consonance as well. Pierre Nora in "Between History and Memory *Les Lieux de Memoire*"(1989) states "In fact, memory has never known more than two forms of legitimacy: historical and literary. These have run parallel to each other but until now always separately. At present the boundary between the two is blurring; following closely upon the successive deaths of memory-history and memory-fiction, a new kind of history has been born, which owes its prestige and legitimacy to the new relation it maintains to the past." (24)

The blending of the dimensions of history and memory recreates some important incidents from the past and Kire is the best example of this interaction between history and memory. Easterine Kire reconstructs the Naga identity through the memories of culture and history in her novels. Her works cover a large range of indigenous Naga aspects including its history, memory, culture, folktales, myths, and amalgamates cultural, historical, political, and social aspects of Naga identity and tries to portray a

hidden aspect of the Naga community. Her works are known to be stories from the natives which record the 'extraordinary experiences of ordinary people'. Literary writers are free to fill the void through 'emplotment' (Ricoeur 1984). Kire employs memory and history in her texts to make the readers aware of the struggles of the Nagas.

### Overview

Easterine Kire's *Mari* accounts for the historical Battle of Kohima. In the novel, the remembrance of Naga's history during the battle of Kohima is penned down by Kire's aunt who used to maintain a diary during war times and it serves to be Kire's inspiration for the novel. The novel can be seen as written documentation of the historical memory of Kohima's battle. It captures various changes that took place in Nagaland during British rule, revolving around the Japanese invasion of Nagaland which resulted in a battle between the British and Japanese army. The war resulted in great exploitation leading to destruction, famine, and traumatic memories in the lives of the people of Kohima. Kire has successfully archived and brought back the horrific incidents of the war. The carefree life depicted at the beginning of the novel gradually leads to a life of violence and war. The war preparations changed the town of Kohima and the construction of roads and buildings took place rapidly. The pleasant town of Kohima turned into a site of destruction and cantonment. The natives had to leave their families, belongings, and even homes to migrate to other safer places. After the war ended, Mari's life was left bereft and she lost various things in life including Victor. She moved on in her life honestly and bravely. She rebuilds herself after the war and her journey is synonymous with the journey of others who were the victims and the survivors of the war. The memories prominent in the novel are of life, war, conflict, and love. In *On Paul Ricoeur: Narrative and Interpretation* (1991), Hayden White states "History has meaning because human actions produce meanings. These meanings are continuous over the generations of human time" (150). The event is a noteworthy event in the history of Nagaland and the lives of the people of Kohima, and Kire has documented and restored the horrific incidents of the war. The novel is a semi-fictional autobiography and revolves

around the life of the protagonist Mari. Kire gives the credit for her novel to the stories of her aunt, mother, and other people who have lived experiences of the war including the oral narrators who transfer the socio-cultural beliefs in the generations and keep alive the memories of the war and struggle of the Nagas. The selection of incidents from history in order to re-establish their identity is a phenomenon practiced by various subaltern ethnicities.

The past cannot be registered until and unless it is represented and reinterpreted through some sort of media/medium. Fiction constructs the past through some oral or written representation. Literature serves as a link that channelizes culture through memory, routes the consciousness and awareness of the past over generations, and provides fixity due to its written nature. The past cannot be realized, it has to be represented through some medium. Memory gives a peep into something that has already happened in the lives of major as well as minor characters of the novel. Wolfgang Iser (1993) uses two terminologies through which fiction acts as a medium of memory representation; 'fictionalizing the facts' is when "extra textual realities merge in the imaginary" whereas 'factualizing the fiction' is when "the imaginary merges into reality" and the creation of fiction takes place. Literature is a link that channelizes culture through memory routes the consciousness and awareness of the past over generations and provides fixity due to its written nature. Art and Literature serve as a material of memory as they represent memory in various forms; as a kind of cultural knowledge production, literature promises permanence and engages cultures of memory. It also conveys historical knowledge between generations.

As the novel revolves around the Battle of Kohima, the aspect of history in memory cannot be put aside. Our understanding of the past affects our experiences in the present in significant ways. Our perception of the present is influenced or warped by the events of the past. Mari can be categorized a 'memory fictional'. As Ivy Roy (2021) states "The term 'memory fictional' needs scholarly attention, where 'memory' represents the knowledge of the past, and fiction is the medium of representations" (6). Kire through 'people stories', gathered information from memories of war survivors through interviews, storytelling,

and discussions about the internal perspectives of the natives regarding various things going on in Nagaland, and she represents it through her fiction. As Ricoeur in *Memory, History, Forgetting* (2004) states "...we have no other resource, concerning our reference to the past, except memory itself" (21). In the novel, Mari recollects her experiences and represents Kohima amid two situations, one is the change in politics and society leading towards modernization and the other is to reclaim the indigenous roots and cultural past. The story examines the effects of colonialism on Naga society via Mari's memories and also brings to light the conflicts between traditional Naga culture and the influence of Western education and religion. The reader is transported back and forth in time by Mari's memories, which give the story its non-linear structure. The way Mari's recollections are presented in this framework enables the reader to understand how traumatic memories and displacement can alter one's perception of time and self. Mari can be categorized as a memory novel because the story revolves around the protagonist's memories of her past.

### Analysis

Remembering is an act of constant repetition. Apart from literature, archives in the forms of statues, sculptures, and towers are not precisely memory but they act as a medium of memory. The information is encoded, gathered, and preserved in them and retrieved later. Human memory is archival. It takes material dimensions for humans to recall some events of the past. Material dimensions are represented in the novel through various artifacts such as places, people, or things. Edward C. Casey in "Place Memory" in *Remembering: A Phenomenological Study* (2000) elaborates "Or more precisely, places are congealed scenes for remembered contents; and as such they serve to situate what we remember" (189). The significance of the physical aspect for actions of cultural memory cannot be ignored and the importance of place as far as remembering is concerned is major as places are used as the vehicles or the carriers of Memory. Such places are known as *lieux de memoire* or 'sites of memory', a term popularized by Pierre Nora. They are not mere sites but are infused with historical and cultural significance. Edward W. Said (2000) in his "Invention, Memory, and

Place" states "Memory and its representations touch very significantly upon questions of identity, of nationalism, of power and authority." (176). The opening of the novel refers to the War Cemetery and the lines "When You Go Home, Tell Them of us and Say / For Your Tomorrow, We Gave Our Today" (Kire 0). The novel contains other minor sites such as a marketplace, bookstores, and small shops which create a visual image of Naga life in the readers' minds. While discussing the past and its stories, the mention of place becomes an essential factor. Places are infused with historical, cultural, and mythical connotations that they can never be solely as a geographical entity. An example is the famous Kohima War Cemetery and the epitaph. In *Mari*, the war graves of soldiers are considered a site of memory for the people. The initial stages of the changes in Kohima's surroundings as mentioned in *Mari* are: "But certain changes became quite visible at the beginning of 1942. For one, airplanes flew over our skies for the first time" (14) and the series of violent eruption and war exploitation as bombing near Kohima, arresting and conflict among the Japanese army and the natives started happening.

The memories of Mari and other children of her age group; working as coolies, helping in road construction, and guiding the British regarding the forest. Victor's letters act as a site of remembrance for her as Kire mentions how Vic wrote her letters and she cherishes them, "His letters were full of affection for me, and he spoke of wanting the war to be over so that we could marry and live happily together" (32). As an oral site of memory, songs are used to create a sense of belongingness and a site of memory to glorify Kohima. The songs were written before the war. As an oral site of memory, songs are used to create a sense of belongingness and a site of memory to glorify Kohima. The songs were written before the war to boost the valor and courage of the soldiers and the local people as "Kohima will Shine Tonight" (38). The war ended and the situation of Kohima was pathetic the earlier beautiful, serene, and happy town was filled with post-war destruction and demolition. The town was filled with the remaining weapons and corpses. "We saw abandoned rifles on the street corners and fragments of mortar shells and grenades." (93) The photograph became an object of

memory for Vic “Every day, he took out your photograph and looked at it, Mari. Every single day” (97) explains how Vic used to remember Mari and looked at her photograph. As Cresswell (2004) suggests there is a tangled relationship between place and memory. Places are infused with historical, cultural, and mythical connotations that they can never be solely as a geographical entity. Nora (1989) suggests that “Memory takes root in the concrete, in spaces, gestures, images, and objects; history binds itself strictly to temporal continuities, to progressions and to relations between things” (9). The novel gives a representation of the places as well as the memories related to them. As the market, church, school, cemetery, etc.

Through Mari, Kire portrays the historical, social, and personal transformations of Mari and the people of Kohima. The novel starts with the early young years of Mari and gradually the pre-war stage takes place, the war happened and the after-effects of the battle felt by the natives and Mari are documented through the story of Mari. The Nagas were brushed by brutal incidents which took place during those months. It was the end of the battle but for the people of Kohima, a new journey of rebuilding their town had just begun. In order to avoid forgetting certain events, places are solidified with meanings given to them. The Kohima war cemetery was built with immediate effect, “The war cemetery was built soon after the war” (108). The reason behind this immediacy was that all the people who have sacrificed their lives for the sake of Kohima and its people can rest in peace respectfully and for the world to acknowledge their struggle and gain some acknowledgment as mentioned in the novel, “...rows of graves with names and dates scribbled on small, hastily erected bamboo crosses” (94). After the war ended, the situation of Kohima was pathetic and the earlier beautiful, serene, and happy town was filled with post-war destruction and demolition. “We saw abandoned rifles on the street corners and fragments of mortar shells and grenades...we couldn’t believe this was Kohima, this mess of human destruction” (93). The physical site of Garrison Hill became a mental site for her forever as well because Victor was buried there and “Garrison Hill...where Vic was laid to rest” (99). While Mari

was trying to start a new life, she was continuously haunted by her past whenever she went for some outings, “The outings brought back memories of the times I had spent with Vic” (123) or she treaded on the same paths as she used to do with Dickie, “I dared not travel on the roads Dickie used to take me on. They held too many memories” (130). Mari’s *fiancé* Vic was also buried on Garrison Hill in the Kohima War Cemetery. Towards the end of the novel, the protagonist moves further in her life yet she realizes the power and dominance of sudden remembrances from the past and how it stops the time for her. “At times, the memories rush in unexpectedly and I feel truly overcome by them” (169). The novel shows the fractured identity and culture of the Nagas and how their history is less represented. It also shows the powerful impact of the incident which is still engraved in the hearts and minds of the Nagas.

### Conclusion

Easterine Kire hazes the binaries between history and memory, between fiction and fact which establishes a repository of Naga history. Memory is a fundamental vehicle for the recreation of the past; in the case of the Naga past, it is the local history of Nagaland witnessed by the people of Nagaland. The motive behind such work of memory and recollection is a hope that the forthcoming generations of Nagas can embrace and envision their cultural history and historical legacy. Kire uses the memories of living people as data to make her work much more reliable, raw, and connecting to the readers. The portrayal of the Memory and History of Nagas in *Mari* gives an insight to the readers into the difficult, unrecognized, and unacknowledged Naga struggle and past. Through the first-person narrative of the novel, Kire makes the readers feel connected to the protagonist so that the readers can get involved in the story. It depends on the members of the culture. In the representation of a cultural memory frame, it is understood that it includes something and excludes everything else. Groups selectively remember and forget some incidents of the past to belong. Social frames organize and select incidents, and events from people’s memories and confirm the aptness of those memories by the group’s identity and further rank and evaluate memories and make a hierarchy. Memories are carefully

produced in a respectable narrative. Kire carefully selects the memories of the Naga struggles and presents Naga Identity in a dignified and respectable narrative to keep the Naga unity intact and the youth informed of their past to give the present generation a sense of acknowledgment of their history and culture. She meticulously portrays Naga's life and its current significance. She vouches for the recognition of Naga's identity and consciousness.

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