

Being Reminiscent of War Memories: A Study of Identity and Love in Easterine Kire's *Mari*

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Abstract:

Easterine Kire is one of the prominent writers from Nagaland, India. She focuses on the indigenous identity of the Naga Angami people in her writings. Kire is the first Naga novelist to write in English so as to give voice to Naga people. The novel *Mari* was published in 2010. She uses her personal history in her historical novel, *Mari* in order to rebuild and represent the unforgettable Battle of Kohima. The war was fought from 4th April to 22nd June 1944. The story revolves around the central character Mari, the protagonist. Kire reveals the bitter experiences of Mari, along with the natives in the war-afflicted region during World War II when the Japanese invaded Kohima. As Kire recollects the past Nagaland, she clearly describes the prewar and post-war condition of Kohima. She uses the personal memory of her aunt. This paper examines how Kire in the novel *Mari* challenges the concept of history as a grand narrative foregrounding the subjective narrative of Mari in the context of the Battle of Kohima. This paper also highlights how Mari's self and identity as well as the collective identity of the Naga people are affected by the onslaught of war. The war leaves a scar on the personal memory of Mari and the collective memory of Naga people.

Keywords: Battle of Kohima, history consciousness, memory, identity, love.

Introduction

Both oral and written narratives play a vital role in the formation of the history of a community. These narratives restore and retrieve the past. It transfers it to the next generation to preserve the historical consciousness of the community or group. Alan Robinson in his book *Narrating the Past: Historiography, Memory, and the Contemporary Novel* (2011) states, "Humans are constantly in transition from the elusive present into future which itself soon becomes the ever receding past. Understandably, we deal with this temporal dislocation by seeking to preserve, retrieve, reinterpret or appropriate past experience" (4). Past events always appeal to the present cognition of any individual.

Indigenous writers across the world represent their indigenous identity through their cultural history. The writers from Northeast India also create new literature which is based on their own history and indigenous culture. Easterine Kire, one of the well known writers from Nagaland, India is the first Naga novelist in English. She represents the colonial history and culture of the indigenous people of Nagaland in her first novel *Sky is My Father: A Naga Village Remembered*. She reconstructs Naga's cultural identity which is at stake because of modernity. She also represents the identity of Naga people in the historical change. In her historical novels like *Sky is My Father: A Naga Village Remembered* (2018), *Bitter Wormwood* (2018), *A Respectable Woman* (2019), Kire uses her knowledge of history to rewrite the history of Nagaland and its people during the time of various historical events like colonialism, World War II, etc. Kire's novel *Mari* (2010) deals with World War II and looks at its after-effect on the Naga people. She vividly details the historical event through the narrative of the protagonist Mari who had recorded her experience of the war in a diary.

Though some of the scholars and writers have written articles to represent war and the condition of the war-affected Nagaland, they do not focus on the narrative representation of history. Easterine Kire writes her novels in the historical and cultural context of Nagaland, a state in Northeast India. Nagaland has a rich heritage of oral narrative and oral tradition, the source of the cultural history, territorial history, and tradition of Naga people. She writes the novel *Mari* against the historical backdrop of World War II and the Japanese Invasion. *Mari* is based on her interaction with her family and the real-life experience of her aunt, Khrielieviu Mari O'Leary. She is the eyewitness and victim of the Battle of Kohima which was fought from 4th April 1944 to 22nd June 1944. This historical moment has a great impact on the Angami people. As the Naga people volunteered, they were also pressed into the services of the British Army in varying capacities: as soldiers, interpreters, scouts, informers, porters, stretch-bearers, construction workers, nurses, mechanics so on. The war survivors reflected their experience. In this connection, Kire states:

Reminiscing about the war years is a very common with a certain generation in Kohima. Those of us, who never knew the war, feel as though we have missed out on a life-changing event. Indeed, it was such for those who lived through it for Kohima was never the same again" (Kire, 11).

It is restored in the Angami community through their oral narrative as transmitted from one generation to another in the form of the story. In the process of writing of the novel, oral history is so important. In this regard, Kire writes:

Listening to her (Mari) narrates this story and badgering her to tell it again and again. And I always knew I would write it down one day. I finally wrote it in 2003, with the help of Mari and a diary she had kept during the war years (Kire, 9).

Kire took several interviews and collected information from Mari's brother and two sisters. The story of the novel examines into "micro-narrative of familial life; and macro narratives of collective identity" (Whitlock 11). The novel not only deals with the story of Mari but also the story of Kohima along with that of her family members. The family members experienced the dire consequence of war along with Mari. Kire turns the oral history/narrative of Mari into the written narrative so that the untold story of 'the unforgettable battle' can be narrated to the rest of the world. Kire tries to rebuild the history

of Kohima from her present perspective. She makes a bridge between past and present which contributes to the making of the sense of past. Kire remarks, “Mari is not just Mari’s story. It is the story of Kohima and its people. Kohima today is very different from the Kohima of my childhood and completely unrecognizable from the Kohima of Mari’s childhood” (Kire, 15). The authorial sense of the present past upholds the notion of new historicists that “revaluates the relationship between the past and the present and calls for a return to the womb of history” to interpret history from present perspective (Kaes, 149). The authorial interpretation of past events from the present perspective is possible for the central character Mari whose experience of the tumultuous war is described in the narrative. The narrative is mixed with joy and grief. Kire writes, “Memories that mingle joy and grief, light and darkness” (Kire, 17).

In the novel, the Protagonist Mari acts as a first person narrator to explain on pre-war time and war-time, and post-war experience in Kohima through her subjective narration. The scenario of the pre-war time of Kohima has been reconstructed through the eye of Mari. Kire states, “Flowers grew wild all over town because there were such few houses. Here and there grew flowering trees like the pink bohemias and the scarlet flame of the forest. The town certainly looked colorful with the trees and flowers blooming everywhere”(Kire,26). Before the war, there was peace and rhythm in the life of Naga people in Kohima. There were schools, shops, and hospitals. Mari narrates, “In these pre-war years, there was a steady rhythm to our lives in our little town” (Kire, 14). The stocks were “set up just after just below the police station, in full view of the main road” (Kire, 25) and there was “a hospital in the middle of the town, an old building with few rooms” (Kire 14). The wrongdoers were under control of the rules and regulations of the British Government. Suddenly, the peaceful life of the Naga people was shattered by the news about the impending war as they were afraid of “how the war in Europe was engulfing the whole world” (Kire, 3). Suddenly war pervades their land in 1943 and the Naga people first witnessed “what war could do to humanity” (Kire, 35). Now the war has changed the peaceful life of Kohima as the Japanese soldiers butchered the refugees, inhabitants of the land of Kohima. It was later occupied by British, Indian, and Gurkha troops. The fear of war compels the traders, hawkers, and the native people to flee to other land and makes the place lifeless. Kire writes, “There was no sign of life in Kohima. There were some stray dogs on the streets” (Kire, 62).

The Battle of Kohima and its memory affects Mari’s individual life. The battle as public history affects her so much. The past events during the war seem to her a present incident as she says, “I remember things that happened fifty years ago as though they had happened yesterday” (Kire, 188). Her self-narrative contributes to the fact that Mari bears the remembering self, remembered self and historical at the same time. In this regard, Robinson says, “remembering self now recalls (and narrates) a remembered self which is taken to correspond to the historical self that was alive at the time” (Robinson 5) of World War II and the Battle of Kohima. Her historical self about this public history is so strong. It has a strong impact on her memory. Kire says, “I guess the past will always be with me” (Kire, 189). The intermingled effect of history and memory leads to the fact that personal history is affected by public history and in return, public history is affected and reshaped by personal history. This connection between this personal and public history is explicit in the new-historicist view – “our analyses and our understandings necessarily proceed from our own historically, socially and institutionally shaped vantage points; that the histories we reconstruct are the textual constructs of critics who are, ourselves, historical

subjects” (Montrose 23). What she remembers is more important for Kire than what had happened in the past because Mari as the subject or individual plays a more important role in the historicity of the Battle of Kohima

Mari’s personal experience during the war and understanding of the situation is explicitly explained through her memory safeguarded in the form of a diary. Kire uses the memory of Mari as an ‘interpretive paradigm’ to deliberate on her situation along with Naga people during the time of World War II and the Japanese invasion. Mari narrates,

I open the diary slowly. The childish scrawl of a young girl fills its pages and, as I read on, I am almost that girl again. Carefree and innocent and oblivious to the way in which the war would change my life forever. I am drawn once again, irresistibly, into that mad whirl of living, loving, and dying. That was the war I knew.(Kire, 18)

Of course, the wartime was memorable for the generation of Mari because everything – growing up, falling in love, war, homelessness, starvation, death, and parting and, finally peace had happened at the same time. Through her memory, she recalls not only “a certain event, place or person, but also contextualize that memory within a certain time, with groups of people or places” (Drozdowski et al. 271). Mari’s historical self has a spatial concern; it bears the collective experience of war afflicted Naga people as her memory is stuck to Kohima, which has lost it and suffers from uncertainty because of war. The emotional and physical destructions during the war have been echoed in the novel. In this connection, Kire remarks, “April was one of the driest months” which signifies the deadly condition of the wasteland Kohima during World War II (Kire,51).Kire’s work foregrounds how lives were affected by the war and yet how people in the Naga Hills battled the uncertainties and perils of the war with a determination to survive. While some suffered losses, some found riches, and some even love. Kire writes:

In retrospect,there are many who continue to see the war years as the best years of their lives. It has been that romanticized. Grim? Certainly. But they were years filled with all the elements of romance: heroic deeds, the loss of lives, fear, uncertainty and deep love. (Kire, 11)

Moreover, the war affects the self and identity of Mari as she becomes the victim of the war. Mari was in love with Victor, a British soldier. She had much hope to marry him. But the beginning of war shatters her dream as she cannot “bear the thought of separation from Victor in the midst of such uncertainty” (Kire 52). She bears the brunt of displacement because the British Government had ordered them to evacuate the place during the insurgency of war. She has been wandering from one place to another for safety and survival. She leaves her maternal home Kohima due to war. She goes to Chieswema and there she has to live a devastated life again in a forest. Her forest life seemed to create more trouble to her because she “felt nauseous all the time and thought it was the lack of food and shelter” (Kire 66). She had been deteriorated not only physically but also emotionally as she is totally bereft of her familial bonding. She was constantly thinking of her mother when she was in the forest. Her mother was still in Kohima during the war. Her ‘self’ swings between hope and fear. She was deeply thinking whether she will get the opportunity to have her family or not.

More obviously, she has witnessed and experienced how much the Japanese soldiers have tortured the native people as Kire puts, “Japanese often come and take away the men. In addition, they take the food the people have scavenged for themselves. In this way the Japanese alienated the local population completely by taking away what little food they had” (Kire, 65). The natives were often plundered, kidnapped by the atrocious Japanese soldiers. Even the natives were killed mercilessly. In this situation, she is longing to know where Victor, Mama, and her father were. Meanwhile, she comes to know that Victor is shot dead by a Japanese soldier. On hearing the news, she is heartbroken totally and she suffers a lot in this situation.

Of course, the traumatic situation changes her totally which is explicit in Mari’s utterance, “I couldn’t help but feel that I had been completely transformed by the war” (Kire, 113). Her narrative about the experience of war contributes to the formation of her identity as a victim of war. Here Mari’s memory and identity are connected. In this connection, Patrick Finney in his book *On War, Memory, and, Identity. Rethinking History* states, “the core meaning of any individual or group identity, namely a sense of sameness over time and space, is sustained by remembering, and what is remembered is defined by the assumed identity” (Finney 5). Kire not only details the story of Naga but also the story of Kohima and trauma of Nagas in the novel. As she states,

The novel is not just “Mari’s story. It is the story of Kohima and its people.... Once upon a time, a war was fought here and it changed lives. The lives of those who died. And those who lived, whose loved ones never returned, the ones who had to find within themselves the strength and courage to rebuild, to give, to love and to celebrate life again. (Kire, 15).

In this novel, the narrative of Mari’s self gets connected with the collective self of Naga people whose memory of war is delineated through her memory. The war has affected Naga’s life and identity to a great extent. It had a great impression on memory and identity as it altered their lives completely and the war “was almost equivalent to the big bang, the beginning of all life” (Kire, 10). The young men left home to join the army, the RAF, and the navy forces. The illiterate people helped the British soldiers carrying ammunitions. Before the war, they were under the control of the British soldiers. The people are much dedicated to their masters and fought for the Allied forces. They almost sacrificed their lives at the altar of war. The natives were arrested by the British soldiers on the suspicion that they were Japanese spies. They suffered death, starvation, homelessness due to the brutal torture of the Japanese forces. They had grim faith in the Allied forces that they would take care of the Nagas during the war but the soldiers themselves appeared quite vulnerable to the atrocity of the Axis forces. The native people were unable to relocate their identity in respect of survival which is quite explicit in the narrative. Kire states, “We are abandoned by the British and left at the mercy of the enemy” (76). Their own home and granaries were burnt down because of air raids and bombing during the war. Both the social life and the collective identity of Naga people are thus affected by the war that alters their identity:

The war created much effect on the psyche and behavior of the Naga people leaving them in great agony. The memory of the war is integrally associated with the memory of trauma as “the memory of the war can be perpetuated through engaging, not dismissing the memory of the trauma and pain of the past” (Wilson 259). The children had heard and seen so much of the war. They had lost their natural laughter and mischief. War makes Jimmy premature man because his cheerful boyish attitude is gone. He does

not respond to any smiles and waving. Jimmy and other victims of war lose “the sense of having a safe place to retreat within or outside oneself to deal with frightening emotions or experiences (Kolk 12). In the novel, through the subjective narrative of Mari, the trauma of war is retrospectively negotiated with collective memory to show the wretchedness of war. The native people have lost everything and experienced death, violence, disease, and physical and emotional torture due to the war.

Summation

Through the narration of Mari the readers could understand the protagonist’s sufferings during the war. It is very much explicit that they lost everything during the war. Kire has used Mari’s memory as an immaterial signifier of war and a tool of subjective narration, Kire has challenged the concept of history as a grand narrative because the understanding of the past depends on the perspective of the character, Mari. When Mari, her mother and others who had experienced the war remembered the stories of those, it had a tangible and emotive impact on her.

Moreover, the authorial representation of the personal experience of Mari, and its connection with the collective notion of war gives a new perspective to the Battle of Kohima. It is an unforgettable episode in the history of Nagaland. Kire’s use of personal narrative as a lived experience to document the Battle of Kohima and its sufferings in the text turns the novel into a historical fiction. Mari’s narrative in the novel very well acts as the ‘foreground’ to capture the ‘background’ on the position or identity of the Angami Nagas in respect of the historical Battle of Kohima.

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