



Reconstructing the Past through Personal Hi(story): War, Memory, and Naga Identity in Easterine Kire's *Mari*

Sanatan Mandal and Dr. Smriti Singh

Abstract

Easterine Kire, the first Naga novelist writing in English as the recent voice of indigenous literature from Northeast India uses personal hi(story) in her historical novel, *Mari* (2010) to reconstruct and represent the unforgettable Battle of Kohima, fought from 4th April to 22nd June 1944. She divulges the bitter experiences of Mari along with her native people in the war-afflicted situation during World War II and Japanese invasion. As Kire revisits past Nagaland, she delineates the pre-war, war, and post-war condition of Kohima, Nagaland using the personal memory of her aunt, Mari who bears the remembering self, remembered self, and historical self at the same time. Using neo-historical approaches, this paper investigates how Kire in the novel *Mari* (2010) 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 takes into consideration how Mari's self and identity, as well as the collective identity of the Naga people, are affected by the onslaught of war which leaves a scar on the personal memory of Mari and the collective memory of Naga people.

Keywords: Battle of Kohima, Historical Consciousness, Memory, Nagaland, Personal Hi(story)

Introduction

Narratives, both oral and written, play a crucial role in the formation of the history of any community or group as these narratives restore and retrieve the past in the present and transfer 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) contends, “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 have an appeal to the present cognition of any individual or ‘subject’ who through his/her narrative creates a ‘present past’ to define his/her position, self, and identity in the temporal shift of any historical process.

In the process of representation of the past of the indigenous or tribal experience, and to define the position of the people in respect of any past event, the narratives based on oral history focuses on the collective notion and perception of the past through a consistent attempt “to listen to the living voices of those who were involved in and/or witnessed the events of interest” (Byrskog 18). Easterine Kire, the first Naga novelist writing in English represents the ‘history from below’ as her writings deliberate on the cultural life and history of the Naga tribal people who sustain their tradition and, love for land through oral history. In her writings, she reconstructs Naga’s cultural identity which is at stake because of modernity and 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. Another historical novel *Mari* (2010) goes back to World War II and looks at its after-effect on the Naga people. She delineates the historical event through the narrative of Mari who had written down her experience of the war in a diary.

Literature Review and Objective of the Paper

Ratan Chandra Das in his article “Silenced Narratives in Easterine Kire’s *Mari*” (2020) deals with how Kire gives voice to this silenced history of the unforgettable Battle of Kohima and unfolds human experiences and anxiety of war. Veena Gour and Subhra Tripathy in “Easterine Kire Iralu’s *Mari: A Historical Narrative of the Forgotten Battle of Kohima*” (2020) examine the effect of war on Naga tradition, culture, and identity. In the article “Being *Mari*: Identity and Becoming in Easterine Kire’s *Mari*” (2016), Siambiakmawi and Sivasish Biswas show *Mari*’s journey from a simple girl to a mature woman through her experience of war. Aghatoli Sema and Dayananda Pathak in “Portraying the Contemporary Spirit of War and Violence in Easterine Kire’s *Mari*” (2019) focuses on the representation of violence of the Battle of Kohima. Bhumika R in her “Engaging with the specific realities of postcolonial literatures: a discussion of the complex socio-cultural and political contours of contemporary Naga literature in English” (2019) tells about the presence of postcolonial markers in the text and how the Nagas negotiate with nation and nationalism. Though these articles represent war and the condition of the war-affected Nagaland, they do not focus on the narrative representation of history. Using new historical approaches, this paper purports to investigate how Kire challenges the concept of history as a grand narrative by foregrounding the self-narrative of *Mari* in the context of the Battle of Kohima. This paper also takes into consideration how *Mari*’s self and identity as well as the collective identity of the Naga people are affected by the onslaught of war which leaves a scar on the personal memory of *Mari* as well as the collective memory of Naga people.

Theoretical Framework

Hayden White makes a clear distinction between history and fiction based on the true and the real as he contends, “historical discourse wages everything on the true, while fictional discourse is interested in the real” (White 147). His concept of ‘metahistory’ holds that historical interpretations require a narrative structure because there is not any causal connection among the events recovered by historical research and this compels the historians to endow “events with ‘meaning’ by projecting a narrative ‘emplotment’ on the past, choosing its generic form and tropological figuration according to aesthetic criteria” (Robinson 10). But while historians have limitations in the process of reinventing the past, the literary writers are free to fill the gap between historical events through ‘emplotment’ and impose aesthetic expressions on the events through their imaginative faculty. Sergio Matos also remarks, “the novelist is able to capture what the historian is hardly to do: the feeling, and the imagination” (Matos 430). In the hand of the literary writers, fiction as the repressed form of historical discourse undertakes any event on the real which “consists of everything that can be truthfully said about its actuality plus everything that can be truthfully said about what it could possibly be” (White 147). Thus historical fiction takes the place of a modern science representing any event in its totality, and projects “the reality of the past, an enabling presupposition of historical inquiry” (White 148) capturing both real and imagined. Though White makes the distinction between history and historical fiction based on the true and the real, he also shows the affinity between literature and history: “Like literature, history progresses by the production of classics, the nature of which is such that they cannot be disconfirmed or negated” (White 89). Linda Hutcheon

establishing the relationship between history and fiction writes, “[B]oth history and fiction are discourses; human constructs, signifying systems and both derive their major claim to truth” (Hutcheon 93). The artistic treatment of history in historical fiction transcends the reality/truth distinction and the literary writers throughout the world through their historical fiction not only focus on historical reality or truth but also represent the past to define their identity and position in “the process of historical change” (Scott 5). The distinction between history and literature is blurred by new literary theoretical approaches. New historicism views literature and history simultaneously in textual analysis. The post-structuralist orientation of history in literature is supported by the new historicists such as Louis Montrose who contends, “Hayden White has forcefully reminded us, such textual histories necessarily but always incompletely constitute in their narrative and rhetorical forms the “History” to which they offer access” (Montrose 20). Dealing with the representation of history rather than the history itself, new historicism challenges the conventional understanding of history by pointing out the private histories.

Historicity of the Text/ Textuality 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* (2010) against the historical backdrop of World War II and the Japanese Invasion. It is based on her interaction with her family and the real-life experience of her aunt, Khrielievu Mari O’Leary, the eyewitness and victim of the historical event of the Battle of Kohima which was fought

from 4th April 1944 to 22nd June 1944. This context of the historical moment has a great impact on the present consciousness of the Angami people as “reminiscing about the war years is a very common with a certain generation in Kohima” (Kire ix) and 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 that Kire writes the novel “listening to her (Mari) tell this story and badgering her to tell it again and again” (Kire vii) and taking interviews and information from Mari’s brother and two sisters.

The story of the novel delves into “micro-narrative of familial life; and macro narratives of collective identity” (Whitlock 11); it is not only the story of Mari but also the story of Kohima along with that of her family members who 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. She attempts to reconstruct the history of Kohima from her present perspective and makes a bridge between past and present which contributes to the making of the sense of *present past*: “Kohima today is very different from the Kohima of my childhood and completely unrecognizable from the Kohima of Mari’s childhood” (Kire xiii). 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 delineated in the narrative through

her “memories that mingle joy and grief, light and darkness” (Kire 1). In the embedded sub-worlds of overarching emplotment in the text, Mari acts as the main historical agent “who, under uncertainty, with bounded rationality, and subject to various constraints, seek(s) to make sense of and act in the narrative world which represents past actuality” (Robinson xi). This ‘past actuality’ has a great affinity with the neo-historicist concept, the “full and authentic past, a lived material existence” which is only accessible by “the textuality of history” (Montrose 20).

Subjective Representation of History

In the novel, the central character Mari acts as a first-person narrator to deliberate 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 recreated through the eye of Mari as “Flowers grew wild all over town because there were such few houses. Here and there were flowering trees like the pink bohemia and the scarlet flame of the forest. The town certainly looked colorful with the trees and flowers all around” (Mari, 10).

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 9) and there was “a hospital in the middle of the town, an old building with few rooms” (Kire 14). The wrongdoers were under control by 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 18). Now the war has changed the peaceful life of Kohima as the Japanese soldiers butchered the refugees, inhabitants of the land of Kohima which was later occupied by British, Indian, and Gurkha troops (Kire 17). The fear of war compels the traders, hawkers, and the native people to flee to other land and makes the place lifeless: “There was no sign of life in Kohima. There were some stray dogs on the streets” (Kire 46).

The subjective narration combines the personal history with the public history, as the Battle of Kohima takes place in Mari’s memory affecting her individual life. The battle as public history affects her so much that 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 170). Her self-narrative contributes to the fact that Mari bears the remembering self, remembered self, and historical self at the same time because her “*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 that it has a strong impact on her memory, “I suppose the past will always remain with me” (Kire 171). 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 crucial role in the historicity of the Battle of Kohima.

Personal Memory/ Self, Collective Self/Memory, and Naga Identity

Mari’s personal experience during the war and understanding of the situation is narrated through her memory safeguarded in the form of a diary and 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 2)

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 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 its glory

and suffers from uncertainty because of war. The emotional and physical devastation during the war is echoed in the novel – “April was one of the driest months” which denotes the deadly condition of the wasteland Kohima during World War II (Kire 51). The war afflicts the self and identity of Mari as she becomes the victim of the war. Mari was in love with Victor, a British soldier, and hoped to marry him. But the beginning of war shatters her dream as she cannot “bear the thought of separation from Victor in the midst such uncertainty” (Kire 52). She bears the brunt of displacement because the British Government ordered them to evacuate the place during the insurgency of war. She has to wander from one place to another for safety and survival. Leaving her maternal home Kohima, she goes to Chieswema and again lives a devastated life in a forest near the place. Her forest life was troublesome to her because she “felt nauseous all the time and thought it was the lack of food and shelter” (Kire 66). She has deteriorated not only physically but also emotionally as she is totally bereft of her familial bonding and constantly thinking of her mother who was still in Kohima during the war. Her ‘self’ oscillates between hope and fear thinking whether she will get the opportunity to have her family or not. She has observed and experienced how much the Japanese soldiers have tortured the native people: “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). Most of the time, natives were looted, abducted, and butchered by the atrocious Japanese soldiers. In this situation, she does not have any knowledge of where Victor, Mama, and her father are. But when she comes to know that Victor is shot dead by a Japanese

soldier, she is broken down totally and goes under trauma. 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 as "the sense of identity" is "intertwined with narratives of the self" and her personal self is deteriorated by the onslaught of war (Greenblatt 8). Here Mari's memory and identity gets intertwined as "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" (Finey 5).

The novel is not just "Mari's story. It is the story of Kohima and its people" during the time of World War II (Kire xii). The relationship between the story and the collective memory of the people of Kohima is quite explicit in the narrative of the novel; one learns that "reminiscing about the war years is very common with a certain generation in Kohima" (Kire ix). In the 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. Here Mari's memory as the "isolated power of the individual genius turns out to be bound up with collective" memory of Naga people (Greenblatt 221). 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 fully and the war "was almost equivalent to the big bang, the beginning of all life" (Kire viii). The young men left home to join the army, the RAF, and the navy forces. The uneducated people helped the British soldiers carrying ammunitions. Before the war, they were under the care and control of the British soldiers and they are so dedicated to their masters that they fought for

the Allied forces and sacrificed their lives at the altar of war. Most of the time, the natives were arrested by the British soldiers on the suspicion that they were Japanese spies. They suffer death, starvation, homelessness, and brutal torture of the Japanese forces. They have grim faith in the Allied forces that they will take care of the Nagas during the war but the soldiers themselves appear quite vulnerable to the atrocity of the Axis forces. Most of the time, natives were looted, abducted, and butchered by the atrocious Japanese soldiers. The native people are unable to relocate their identity in respect of survival which is quite explicit in the narrative, “We are abandoned by the British and left at the mercy of the enemy” (Kire 76). Their own home and granaries were burnt down because of air raids and bombing during the war. The social life, as well as the collective identity of Naga people, is thus affected by the war that alters their identity:

War necessarily entails ruptures in the fabric of identity on multiple levels since it engenders death and the personal experience by combatants and others of unimaginable horror, the distortion of patterns of everyday life and suspension of normal modes of behavior, the disruption of social, economic, family and gender relations, and profound political and geopolitical change. (Finney 6)

Memory of Trauma

The war creates a deep effect on the psyche and behavior of the Naga people leaving them in trauma. The war affected the psyche and behavior of the Naga people and left them in trauma. 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 that they had lost their natural laughter and mischief. War makes Jimmy prematurely a man because his cheerful boyish attitude is gone and he does not respond to any smiles and waving (Kire 86). 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 in which the native people have lost everything and experienced death, violence, disease, and physical and emotional torture.

Conclusion

Using memory as an immaterial signifier of war and a tool of subjective narration, Kire challenges the concept of history as a grand narrative because the understanding of the past depends on the perspective of Mari. Through her authorial interpretation and historical consciousness, she not only attempts to understand history but also questions the position of the Angami people in the historical process of war. In the novel, 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, 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 treatment in the text turns the novel into historical fiction. Bhumika R writes in this regard, “*Mari* can be read as either a biographical fiction or a historical fiction where history is narrated through the little stories of people’s lives and articulated through the genre of fiction” (6). Mari’s narrative in the text acts as the ‘foreground’ to

capture the ‘background’ or context deliberating on the position or identity of the Angami Nagas in respect of the historical event of the Battle of Kohima.

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