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## **Exploring Tangents of Cultural Memory in Easterine Kire's *Mari* and *Sky is My Father: A Naga Village Remembered***

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### **Abstract:**

India's Northeast has been subject to violence, subjugation, and neglect. Voices of the authors from the Northeast display the vision of modifications in the Naga identity. Easterine Kire is apart from other writers of the Northeast in her detailed, sensitive, and realistic representations of Nagaland's socio-political scenario and its contemporary connectivity. *Mari* (2010) traces Naga's struggle and contribution during World War II. *Sky Is My Father: A Naga Village Remembered* (2018) showcases Naga Indigeneity and how oral traditions, social taboos, rituals, and festivals have a crucial part in the creation of a community. This research paper intends to explore aspects of Cultural Memory through the framework of Jan Assmann and Astrid Erll. The paper also intends to explore how these novels serve as a medium for remembering the cultural history and sustaining the identity of the Naga community.

**Keywords:** Cultural Memory, Naga Identity, Naga Culture, Northeast.

### **Introduction**

The existence of human beings is unimaginable without memory and is crucial in creating one's self and identity. Memory Studies, as an academic field, analyzes memory usage as a tool for the methods in which the previous events are remembered in the present context. It is an interdisciplinary field that combines aspects from various fields, such as anthropology, history, literature, sociology, and psychology. The entanglement of memory with history is a

phenomenon expressed through fiction. Literature mixes forms, genres, and disciplines, crossing boundaries. Therefore, it is a reliable way of representing memories. Aristotle's empiricist approach has been further taken into consideration by John Locke in his essay *An Essay Concerning Human Understanding* (1689), which suggests that an individual takes place in the world as a *tabula rasa* or a blank slate and later starts to form memory through their sensory experiences. Locke's 'memory theory' (1689) suggests that the existence of an individual or a community depends upon what they remember; therefore when the memory of a person or community diminishes, so does their existence. Maurice Halbwachs' seminal works *Social Frameworks of Memory* (1925) and *On Collective Memory* (1992) paved the path for contemporary Cultural Memory Studies. In *Social Frameworks of Memory* (1925), he describes how social structures support the development and maintenance of memory. "It is in society that people normally acquire their memories. It is also in society that they recall, recognize, and localize their memories" (Halbwachs 1992). He creates collective memory, considering people cannot think independently of their social or communal context. The end of colonialism from 1945 to 1960, the Holocaust from 1941 to 1945, and the emergence of a significant eruption of memories from the notable events in the late twentieth century occurred in the late 1980s. Cultural memory is a branch that amalgamates cultural studies and memory studies and includes psychology, sociology, literature, and archaeology. The French historian Pierre Nora explored the tangent of place and memory in "Between History and Memory: *Les Lieux de Mémoire*" (1989), emphasizing the prevalence of the 'sites of memory' to preserve them for longer. Jan Assmann popularized the term Cultural Memory in his seminal essay "Collective Memory and Cultural Identity" (1995), in which he articulates the prominence of Cultural Memory. Cultural memory is dynamic, dynamically changing, transferred, and formed. We attempt to record it so that it stays with us and serves as a significant transmission point highlighting how crucial the past was in creating and establishing the cultural text. According to Jacques Le Goff, memory is history's basic building block. Similar to Assmann's concept of mnemohistory, memory, and history can be viewed as complementary to one another rather than necessarily in opposition. There is minimal discussion on Northeast Indian literature. The complex and violent past of Northeastern India has had a profound impact on the literary creations of this region. In his *Naga Identity* (2005), Braja Bihari Kumar adds, "The composite Naga identity is of recent origin and it lacks claimed historical support" (20). The region has witnessed various insurgencies, counter-insurgencies, violence, and armed conflicts. In *Northeast India: A Reader*, Oinam and Bhagat point out that "In recent times, the region is no more a strange or a distant land to the average educated Indians. From a state of *tabula rasa*, Northeast India has now become a mosaic of

multiple impressions. However, it is to be noted that many of these impressions are hinged on stereotypical imageries” (1). The writers from Nagaland took a step further to create and preserve; maintain and develop their culture and identity via literature. Human beings are the carriers of memory, and the need to record is ever-present in humankind. Previously events were recorded orally, via mnemonics, or using symbols. Writing is employed as a medium to record memories of what happened due to the phenomenon of recording occurrences. Paul Ricoeur discusses why and how certain events are remembered by a larger group of individuals in his 2006 *Memory, History, Forgetting*, Ricoeur investigates how memory and forgetfulness interact and suggests that human beings have no other source to refer to earlier except memory. In “Problems in The Typology of Culture.” Jurij Lotman defines culture as “the sum of all nonhereditary information and the means of its organization and preservation” (213). Aleida Assmann also suggests that cultural memory is developing, endangered, transmitted, and constructed. We make an effort to record it so that it stays with us and serves as a significant hub of transmission. The Naga culture and cultural memory are endangered and unacknowledged. The Naga writers took a step ahead in creating and preserving their culture and identity in the form of fiction. Humans carry their memories through groups, legends, myths, rituals, and festivals. The literature and culture of Nagaland were unsuccessful in their attempts to become part of the mainstream despite several attempts. The construction of the War Cemetery, the Cremation Memorial, and the World War II Museum in Nagaland provided an idea of collective and societal remembrance. Nevertheless, the Nagas continued to feel different from the rest of the country because none of these attempts were acknowledged or adequately recognized. Easterine Kire is a prolific author from Nagaland. Having various prizes, such as The Hindu Prize for Fiction (2015) and the Tata Literature Live Book of the Year Award, Kire has put much effort towards making the previously untold story of Indigenous Nagaland more prominent. She sheds light on several obscure and underappreciated aspects of Nagaland in her writings. Kire rewrites the historical and cultural relevance of the Naga past and culture in her novels *Sky is My Father: A Naga Village Remembered* (2018) and *Mari* (2020). The native Naga culture and their perceptions of the past are highlighted in Easterine Kire’s literary portrayal. Her writings include various Naga topics, such as their history, culture, folklore, and myths.

While reading the literature available on the realities of Cultural Memory, there was a void found as far as the selected fiction of Easterine Kire is concerned, as these texts are not extensively explored from the viewpoint of Cultural Memory. This study aspires to investigate various facets of cultural memory and how it contributes to the upkeep and conservation of Naga cultural memory.

## Theoretical Framework

The paper intends to highlight the importance and contribution of Easterine Kire to national and international awareness of literature from Nagaland. The approach of Memory Studies and Cultural Memory will be applied to the analysis of the texts. Kire's novels are mostly concerned with the history and culture of Nagaland's Indigenous people. The conflict between Britain and Khonoma between 1832 and 1880, which concluded with a peace treaty on March 27, 1880, is shown descriptively in *Sky is My Father: A Naga Village Remembered* (2018). Along with the historical background, it also explores the cultural tangent of Naga lives, where Kire gives an in-depth description of some of the significant cultural, religious, and spiritual beliefs of the Nagas. *Mari* (2010) describes the war of Kohima and the writing of Naga's historical commemorations during the war. The story, which serves as Kire's inspiration for the book, is about her aunt, who kept a diary during the war. It is possible to interpret the novel as a written record of the historical memory of the battle of Kohima, which led to considerable exploitation and caused trauma, starvation, and ruin in the lives of the Kohima people. The novel captures the survival story of the Nagas during that hard and life-threatening time. Contemporary memory studies focus on the dynamics, productivity, and performativity of memory. Literary studies combine realities with possibilities, fiction shares the fluidity of memory, the novel offers us multiple points of view, and it is an interesting mode of representation. Marek Tam in "History as Cultural Memory: Mnemohistory and the Construction of the Estonian Nation" (2008) states: "Narrative is the essential device for containing cultural memory and for guaranteeing the coherence of different events of the past." (Tamm 8). The narrative is one of the mediums through which the memories and events of the past are remembered and maintained in present times. In Literature, symbols, events, and ideas of collective/cultural memory are constructed and placed consciously into the narrative. Memory is a source of human identity and by penning down their memories, the Naga authors represent their identity to the world. Easterine Kire chooses the powerful tool of fiction to portray the indigenous Naga culture.

## Discussion

The novel *Mari* focuses on the historical aspect of Naga's life. Kohima was once a scene of Allied victory, and in present times, it is a site of memory for the Naga triumph over the Japanese in the Kohima Battle during the Second World War. Assmann notes in his characteristic of the "construction of identity," similarly, the Nagas act upon the shared activities that form and reinforce their identity; these behaviors are essential to the creation and concretion

of communal identity. What Assmann (1995) suggests is that “The basic principle behind all connective structures is repetition” (3). Through repetition, a structure forms and it is maintained, which makes a place for that culture. So, in the novel, we can see this structure of repetition in the forms of rituals and how they are carried along throughout generations. Certain beliefs, such as those of the *Genna* days and spirit-pleasing festivals, are depicted to demonstrate how beliefs endure via repetition. According to Olick's 2008 article, "From Collective Memory to the Sociology of Mnemonic Practices and Products," people must repeatedly recall the experiences because they are important to them and because we constantly dread losing our memories. Pethes in *Cultural Memory Studies: An Introduction* (2019) agrees with the idea of the incomplete ability of people to remember and the requirement of a medium that makes it permanently accessible and covers the shortcomings of individual memory. So, to overcome the shortcomings of individual memory, it is necessary to make it the memory of culture as culture progresses, and it never dies. In *Cultural Memory and Early Civilizations: Writing, Remembrance, and Political Imagination* (2011), Jan Assmann articulates, “Anyone who during today fixes his eyes on tomorrow must preserve yesterday from oblivion by grasping it through memory. This is how the past is reconstructed, and this is the sense in which we can say that the past comes into being when we refer to it” (17). It highlights the importance of the past to understand the present and to plan the future. The Battle of Kohima is the central theme of the book, thus it is impossible to ignore the historical component of memory. Our perception of the past profoundly impacts how we view the present. Narayan Ch. Ghataraj in his paper “Cultural Memory and Remembrance: Exploring Orality and Identity in Northeast Poetry.” states: “People whose history had been pushed to the margins as not conforming to the Eurocentric concept of modernity, have taken up the task of re-creating their past and re-inventing tradition to represent the present development from the past to the future.” (418). Past experiences shape or distort how we perceive the present and *Mari* is fit to be called a ‘memory fictional’. The novel represents history as a daily activity on personal, familial, and communal levels. The novel mainly comes from the diary of firsthand experiences of Kire’s aunt Mari. Kire, through ‘people stories’, conversations, stories, and interviews with war survivors, acquired information on the internal viewpoints of the locals regarding various issues occurring in Nagaland, which she then portrayed in her fiction. Mnemohistory does not focus much on the actuality of the events in the previous time but instead concentrates on the effect and reception of the event. It examines how memories are shaped by past experiences both positively and negatively, and how the past may be both an unconscious weight and a conscious decision. Marianne Hirsch shares a similar idea in *The Generation of Postmemory: Writing and Visual Culture After the Holocaust* (2012), who opines that

postmemory is how the trauma of historical events passes to the new generations without direct experience of those traumatic historical events. It is referred to as inherited or intergenerational trauma and serves as a medium of historical and cultural consciousness. In the same way, Kire's novels serve as a medium of postmemory to the youth of Nagaland. Ricoeur (2006) states, "We have no other resource, concerning our reference to the past, except memory itself." (21).

In *Mari*, the protagonist recalls the encounters of war and stands in for Kohima in the following contexts: the modernization-driven shift in Naga politics and society, and the struggle to recover Kohima's cultural legacy and indigenous heritage. Overall, *Mari* is a potent examination of memory, trauma, and cultural identity that emphasizes the value of retaining one's cultural history in the face of outside forces. In archives, sculptures, towers, books, and other media that serve as memory carriers rather than actual memory itself, remembering is an ongoing process of repetition. Location plays a crucial role in memory retention since it serves as the carrier or vehicle of memory, which highlights the necessity of the physical element for cultural memory activities. Under their inherent historical and cultural value, these locations are referred to as "sites of memory," a concept made popular by Pierre Nora. The novel has various sites; the opening lines "When You Go Home, Tell Them of Us and Say / For Your Tomorrow, We Gave Our Today" (Kire 0). Other minor locations in the book, like a marketplace, bookshops, and small businesses, let readers visualize Naga's life. While discussing the past and its stories, mentioning place becomes essential. Places are infused with historical, cultural, and mythical connotations that they can never be solely as a geographical entity. Edward Casey in *Imagining: A Phenomenological Study* (2000) states: "Places are congealed scenes for remembered contents, and as such they serve to situate what we remember" (189). 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 commencement of the violent eruptions, war exploitation, bombings close to Kohima, arrests, and fighting between the Japanese troops and the locals. She finds solace in Victor's writings since, as Kire notes, Vic was the one who wrote her letters, which she treasures, "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). In addition to serving as an oral site of remembering, songs were utilized to elevate Kohima, foster a feeling of community, and inspire the bravery and valor of the locals and soldiers as "Kohima will Shine Tonight" (38). 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) describes how Vic used to stare at Mari's picture and recall her. Although the struggle had concluded, the citizens of Kohima still had a new mission ahead of them: rebuilding their town. The Kohima War Cemetery was constructed right away, “The war cemetery was built soon after the war” (108). This expediency was necessary so that everyone who gave their life to defend Kohima and its citizens might do it with dignity and for the world to recognize their battle and give them some credit. The town was clogged with the last of the dead and weaponry after the battle. Victor was buried at Garrison Hill, therefore for Mari, the actual location became a mental place. The protagonist of the book advances in her life toward the book's conclusion, yet she still comes to understand the strength and control of unexpected memories from the past and how they can pause time for her. “At times, the memories rush in unexpectedly and I feel truly overcome by them” (169). The carefree life of the protagonist is depicted in the novel's beginning, gradually leading to the emergence of violence and war in her life. Mari is a war survivor. Despite the devastation caused by the end of the war, Mari bravely and honestly carried on with her life. Her story and the journeys of other war victims and survivors are interchangeable.

Culture is the dynamic constellation of ways of life (Rogoff 2003). A culture assimilates the shared meanings and practices that combine a group as a single unit. Culture and Memory go together as the remembrance and continuation of rituals, ceremonies, and cultural practices are connected to the commemorative practices discussed in Memory Studies. Cultural Identity is the sense of affinity that one has towards the group. It has its ties to nationality, ethnicity, religion, language, and values of a particular group of people following the same functions. These things also work as cultural locators. Connerton (1989) elaborates: “...we are likely to find it in commemorative ceremonies, but commemorative ceremonies prove to be commemorative only in so far as they are performative; performativity cannot be thought without a concept of habit; and habit cannot be thought without a notion of bodily automatisms.” (4-5). To make a memory cultural, it has to go through constant repetitions to become a part of that culture. *Sky is My Father: A Naga Village Remembered* focuses more on the core cultural aspect of Naga's lives and unfurls the ordinary lives of the people, how the elders always have a keen eye on the village, and how they experience mild changes in their culture and how these new changes make their culture renewed with the contemporary time.

In the chapter entitled “The Metaphysics of Narrativity: Time and Symbol in Ricoeur's Philosophy of History”, In the book *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 novel includes minute details as women returning in small groups carrying baskets with firewood and how men of the village keep the village protected and guarded against outside forces and never let anyone doubt their strength. Astrid Erll lists the ‘social’, ‘material’, and ‘mental’ processes as the three ways that cultural memory is constructed in “Cultural Memory Studies: An Introduction” (2008). She also mentions how the past is remembered using the ‘modes of remembering’ in culture. Some modes of remembering she mentions are: “myth, religious memory, political history, trauma, family remembrance, or generational memory” (7). The social dimension includes social gathering, story-telling, and social laws. The novel emphasizes social themes through a range of rites and rituals that fulfill two functions: maintaining cultural continuity and fostering social connectivity. It also includes the laws of the village which everyone has to abide by. The material aspects are represented through the ornaments of war and the *daos* used in the battle. Places such as *morungs* where learning and communication take place. The mental aspects include their belief in spiritualism and animism, along with the thought and psychology behind the performing of rituals. It also includes the sense of duty and obligation towards the norms of the village. Sharing memories through oral transmission is one of the significant characteristics of native culture.

Kire has reflected on how carefully words are uttered by the people. Words carry power and they can be used to negotiate, pacify, and destroy. Words are supreme to Nagas and they use their words with full dignity and consciousness. In the negotiation of the Peace treaty in the novel, ““Do you need a written treaty?’ the General asked again” (Kire 106). ““No,’ Pelhu shook his head and said firmly, ‘if we have said there will be peace between us, there will be peace. We do not need to write it down.”” (Kire 107) “General Nation was suitably impressed by the old warrior’s wisdom. He stood to his feet and gripped Pelhu’s hand firmly. The treaty was made between village representatives of Khonoma and the representatives of the British Government at Mezoma on the 27th March 1880” (Kire 107). The tradition of storytelling is powerfully prevalent in the Nagas, and it also enriches and strengthens the cultural consciousness. The story of *Terhuo tsiese* (spirit erected stone) is transgenerational as when Levi asked if he had heard the chanting, Lonyu answered, “No, my son, I am old but not that old. This story was told me by my grandfather whose great-grandfather saw it” (Kire 32). It represents how cultural memory gets transmitted to future generations. Connerton suggests that through repetition, a story breaks the binaries of contingency and becomes transgenerational. The Naga fought a battle of resistance against the British in 1832 and 1880, which changed much about Naga’s lives and introduced new things such as English education and Christianity. The younger generation was

surprised to learn about and adjust to Christianity, while the elder generations, who were steadfast in their belief in animism, were shocked by it. She writes about the slow approach of Christianity through the character of Sato. In *Nagaland in Transition* (2005), Charles Chasie articulates, “Things were not made easier by the larger community often reviling the early Christian converts as social outcasts.” (261). The Naga people in Nagaland were largely against Christianity because they thought it would destroy their way of life and culture. Through the character of Sato, Kire wants to mention the problems faced by the new converts. Sato was treated harshly and he was discarded from the family by his father “I’ll not kill you but I’ll no more say, I have another son” (Kire 126). Levi felt a sense of betrayal from Sato when he mentioned his religious faith in Christianity. Narayan Ghataraj in “Cultural Memory and Remembrance: Exploring Orality and Identity in Northeast Poetry” (2014) puts light on it “The colonial past has shaped and reshaped the cultural identities of most communities in Northeast while Christianity has added another dimension to cultural loss and recovery”. (418). It resonates with the theory put forth by Aleida Assmann, according to which a culture must be able to accept, reject, and evolve as time goes on to survive.

The research is limited to the aspects of history and culture expressed and elaborated by Easterine Kire in her novels *Mari* and *Sky is My Father: A Naga Village Remembered*. For further research, one can explore the aspects of post-memory, altered history, nationalism, and extremism depicted in the literature of Nagaland.

## Conclusion

To create a library of Naga history, Easterine Kire blurs the lines between memory and history as well as between fiction and reality. The hope that the next generation of Nagas will embrace and envision their cultural past and historical legacy is the driving force behind such remembrance and recollection projects. *Mari*’s depiction of the Memory and History of the Nagas offers viewers a glimpse into the challenging, unappreciated, and unrecognized Naga past and struggle. In representing a cultural memory frame, it includes something and excludes everything else. To preserve Naga unity and to educate the youth about their history, Kire carefully chooses the memories of the Naga conflicts and puts them in a respectable and dignified narrative, which helps the current generation feel that their history and culture are acknowledged. She certifies the acknowledgment of Native Angami identity and consciousness and carefully depicts Naga’s life and its contemporary significance. Kire glorifies the Naga past and history and attempts to restore its importance in the significant canon of Indian history. The way that the memory, culture, and history of the Naga people are portrayed in *Sky is My Father: A Naga Village*

*Remembered* offers readers a glimpse into the difficult, overlooked, and unacknowledged struggles and history of the Naga people. She represents a kaleidoscopic view of Nagas through the native stories, traditions, animism, taboos, and religion along with the colonial arrival in Nagaland and towards the end of her novel, she showcases the changing arena of the Nagas and how they are developing, changing and accepting the hybrid reality of their existence. The central part of the novel contains remembrances from the past, including violence, battle, survival, tribe consciousness, culture, conflicts, stories, and fears. Towards the novel's end, Kire presents a changing image of Nagaland and how the memory of Naga's past is sustained through institutions and commemorations. These novels are accurate representations of various shades of Naga culture and an appropriate medium to preserve and transmit the Cultural Memory from natives to readers and future generations. The paper fulfils the objective of throwing some light on the historical and cultural aspects of Nagaland through the novels of Easterine Kire.

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