

Writing Lives, Re-membering History in Easterine Kire's *Mari*

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Abstract: This paper examines Easterine Kire's *Mari* (2010) as life writing, particularly as historico-biographical fiction. *Mari* foregrounds the memories of Mari and her people during the Battle of Kohima in the Naga Hills. This paper analyses how Kire pushes the boundaries of life writing and further complicates a simplistic reading of *Mari* as a *fictional* narrative. What is the centrality of narrativising (Mari's) memories of the war in (auto)-biographical manner? Can Kire's novel be read as a corrective to "official" history that finds little resonance of local participation during the war? These are some questions addressed in this paper. It also postulates how *Mari* assumes the form of hetero-emotive site – a site that memorialises and evokes memories of the tumultuous yet exciting times during the Second World War in North East India.

Keywords: Life-writing, memory, Battle of Kohima, Second World War, emplotment, Northeast India

Mari 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 forgive, to love and to celebrate life again. (Kire 2010: xii-xiii)

Easterine Kire's *Mari* (2010) is not only a biographical account of Khrielievüü Mari O'Leary, the Kire's maternal aunt; it is also a historical account of the Naga community and Kohima during the Battle of Kohima (1944).¹ Kire foregrounds the personal struggle and resilience of Mari and her people against the onslaught of the battle between two imperial armies, the British imperial army and the Japanese imperial army. The first part of this essay provides a brief historical overview of the developments during the Second World War in the Naga Hills. The second part establishes how Kire pushes the boundaries of life writing and complicates a simplistic reading of the *fictional* narrative. The concluding part proposes how *Mari* assumes the form of hetero-emotive site – evoking others' memories of the war – be it within the Naga community or beyond, thereby instilling interests among readers to retrieve such memories and histories of one's past.

“Britain's Greatest Battle”²

For Kire, narrating the story of Mari was inseparable from reviving the memory and experience of the Battle of Kohima which had largely remained a “forgotten battle” (Kire 2010: x). Firstly, the historiography of the battle has been primarily centred on the battlefield experiences of soldiers, with little resonance of Naga people's experiences.³ Secondly, the memories of the Nagas who fought and lived through those times are fading as very few who can recount the war experiences remain. Correspondingly, the prospects of textual interventions to record the historic experiences of the Naga people have dwindled. Besides the exclusion of the Naga contribution and their experience in the mainstream war narratives, the *forgetting* of the legacy of the war may have been due to the apathy towards

the battle fought on their land by foreign armies. In *Road to Kohima*, “the first comprehensive Naga narrative ... covering the full spectrum of Naga experiences of the Second World War and the Battle of Kohima”, it was revealed that the battle “had never been considered as a Naga fight by the Naga people” and neither did the Naga people consider it “as a part of their history” (Chasie and Fecitt 19).

Despite these sentiments, people who lived through those tumultuous times remember how the Naga people assisted the British Army in quelling the invading Japanese Army. Naga people volunteered and 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, and so on (Khrienuo 60–61; Chasie and Fecitt 86). The war survivors reminisce their experiences with equal enthusiasm and excitement when asked about the same.⁴ It was a life-changing event: for young and the old, and for people and places alike. Kire informs:

Reminiscing about the war years is 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. (2010: ix)

The onset of the war and the subsequent developments in the Naga Hills tossed people's lives into a frenzy of activities and fear simultaneously. It was not just the climate of tensions and anticipation picking up momentum; “everything happened at the same time” (Kire 2010: viii). For the war generation, “the World War II and the Japanese invasion” were “the most momentous period of their lives” (viii). 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 puts:

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. (2010: ix)

Rightfully claiming a place among the historical accounts of the Second World War, Kire's *Mari* negotiates a space to include *ordinary* experiences of the local people. Before a detailed analysis of what may be called historico-biographical narrative (written in autobiographical mode) is set forth, an overview of the Battle(s) of Kohima/Imphal follows.

The Battle(s) of Kohima/Imphal was one of the “greatest battles” Britain had ever fought. The determined force of the allied powers, with significant contribution by the local populace, turned the tide of the battle against the formidable Japanese Army. The Fifteenth Army (15th, 31st and 33rd Divisions) of the Imperial Japanese Army (IJA) entered the Indian terrains to execute Operation U-Go under the command of Lieutenant-General Mutaguchi Renya in March 1944. The Fifteenth Army was supported by the Indian National Army (INA) under the leadership of Subhash Chandra Bose in this operation. Laying seize on Imphal was integral if the Japanese hold over Burma were to be reinforced and protected. Imphal, then, was the Headquarters of the IV Corps of the British Fourteenth Army (commanded by Lieutenant-General Slim). Christopher L. Kolakowski explains the strategy:

Capturing Imphal and the surrounding area would eliminate a major British base in eastern India and hopefully cause restive elements of the Indian population to revolt against British rule in a larger version of 1942's Quit India Movement. (8)

Mutaguchi intended to seize Kohima, thereby cutting off Imphal from the rest of India. In addition, he aimed to capture Dimapur, then a depot for storing supply for the British Army. Mutaguchi's calculation for success in this offensive was based on the swiftness with which this plan could be executed. He had planned to seize the British depots within

three weeks and thereafter effectively supply his army with the logistics and rations needed to seize Imphal by April 10, 1944. Lyman explains:

His plan entailed three simultaneous thrusts deep into Manipur: in the south from Tiddim, in the south-east from Tamu and the third to cut off the reinforcement route from Dimapur across the mountains at Kohima [under the command of Lieutenant-General Sato Kotoku of 31st Division of the 15th Army]. (2010: 24)

Relying on this strategy, Mutaguchi was confident of the outcome of this operation. However, what began as a highly optimistic march of the Japanese Army toward the siege of Kohima and then eventually the seizure of Imphal turned into a nightmarish and desperate struggle for survival, let alone sustain the offensive. The Battle of Kohima lasted for seventy-nine days – from April 05 to June 22, 1944. Calling it “the most desperate and bloody struggle in the entire war on the south Asian land mass,” Lyman informs the British casualties to be “around 4,000 men and the Japanese over 7,000 casualties” (88).

In her Own Voice

Mari brings alive the story of Kire’s maternal aunt Mari, which she had repeatedly heard from her aunt. Kire constructs the narrative in first-person, with Mari recounting the experience of the Battle of Kohima in her own voice. Kire’s mode of storytelling in this novel is a conscious choice and a telling one. By choosing to represent Mari’s experiences in an “autodiegetic”⁵ narrative and by “emplotting”⁶ the historical events and personages of the wartimes in the form of a diary-novel, Kire engages in a life-writing that blurs generic norms and refuses a singular reading of the same.

Firstly, Kire positions her aunt Mari as the collaborator of her own life narrative. Kire reconstructs the story of Mari in an autodiegetic, diary-form narrative. The historical subject (Mari) then extends her interest and help in constructing the narratorial and the fictional subject through numerous story-telling sessions. Although Kire confesses that she had been writing *Mari* in her head since she was sixteen-years-old, she finally put Mari’s story into writing in 2003, when she was forty-four (2010: vii). Kire recounts she spent her

summer holidays with Mari in northern Assam, listening to her tell this story and badgering her to tell it again and again. I always knew I would write it down one day. (vii)

Kire finally reconstitutes Mari’s story from the stories she heard from her aunt during the summer vacations; from “several interviews and long-distance phone calls to get the missing details from both Mama and Mari” (vii); and from the memories Mari had inscribed in the diary had recorded during the war years. Kire confesses having read Mari’s diary “a hundred times” (vii). Kire took seven long years in reconstructing Mari’s story as a novel, “trying to flesh it out with more details” with Mari’s help (vii).

In *Autobiographies of Others*, Lucia Boldrini observes that several novels, published since the mid twentieth century, are “presented *as if* they are autobiographies of historical personages— novels that gesture towards historical factuality and literary fictionality, towards ‘truth’ and invention” (1). Such an exercise of writing someone else’s autobiography

can become a powerful literary and intellectual tool to reflect on cultural, historical and philosophical constructions of the human ... on the relationships of power that define the subject socially and legally; of the ethics of the voice and the ethical implications of literary practices of representation; and, therefore, also on the social, political and cultural role of the literary writer. (Boldrini 6)

In this life-writing, Kire not only pushes the genre of (auto)biography; she also foregrounds a crucial site of critical discourse by subverting the *appropriateness* of (auto)biographical subject and by writing a history for her people (in relation to “official” historiography and

mainstream narratives). Conventional (auto)biographical writing considers a person of national importance or public significance to be its fitting subject. Georg Misch postulates that autobiographies are not only “representations of individual personalities” but are also the “representative of their period” (12). However, not all autobiographies *may* claim the “representative” status. Only autobiographies “by a person of exceptional calibre” and by “an eminent person who has himself played a part in the forming of the spirit of his time” qualify to be representative of its own times (13). Taking into consideration such a prescriptive norm, the (auto)biographical subject of *Mari* neither claims an “exceptional calibre” nor a status of eminence. If anything, *Mari* represents every woman who suffered losses and displacement, and who struggled for basic amenities such as food and shelter during the war.

Secondly, by writing down *Mari*'s life experience in the form of a diary, Kire kept this life-writing as close as possible to its historical subject and its archival source. The diary form in which the novel is written may be explained as a form of “remediation” (Erl 2008: 393). This process requires the insertion of personal and public documents such as “letters, newspaper articles, and drawings made on the spot” into cultural productions, “thus endowing these later media with the atmosphere of experientiality and authenticity” and often leading to the blurring of the “boundaries between documentary material and fictional reenactment” (Erl 2008: 393). At another level, by inserting *Mari*'s diary in this novel, Kire gives voice to and registers the experiences of an ordinary Naga woman in the history of the Second World War that has more often than not memorialised male accomplishments.

Kire's *Mari* may be a fictionalisation of *Mari*'s experiences through the war years and beyond: finding love and losing the same at the same time; of childhood lost and re-assembling her life as she becomes a mother; of finding new preoccupations and life as she becomes a nurse; finding love again with Patrick in their marriage; and finally retiring in the hills of her home. The fictionality of this narrative is, however, undermined by its historical referentiality – both in terms of life/historical events as well as personages. Kire, in this way, engages in a life-writing which, at one level, poses as the (auto)biographical account of *Mari*; and which, at another level, underscores the historicity of the events emplotted.

Mari serves as a mediating narrative between the oral form of remembering the war and the rigidities of history writing as a discipline. For a community that had been drawing upon the rich oral culture for its identity and continuity, Kire's storytelling plays a crucial role in providing a conduit for this memory to be realised in a form – from the abstract to the literalised – that shall remain with the posterity.

Emplotting the Battle, Literalising Memories

As mentioned earlier, Kire's *Mari* defies easy generic identification, calling into question any suggestion of *fictionality* this narrative might suggest. By emplotting the battle into *Mari*'s life narrative, Kire heightens the historical referentiality of the events recorded in this novel.

Emplotment is the “the process of exclusion, stress, and subordination” of historical events in “constituting a story of a particular kind” (White 1973: 6) – a process which White likens to the emplotment of a fictional narrative (1978: 84). While White's observation on the similarity of history and fiction – as far as history as “verbal artifacts” is concerned – remains contested,⁷ the act of inclusion/exclusion, “suppression or subordination” – which more often than not is determined by the historian's subject position – remains uncontested. History writing of the Battle of Kohima has been marked by a similar inclusion/exclusion, with hitherto existing historical accounts primarily focusing on the military, combative aspects of the battle. Kire exercises similar act of inclusion/exclusion in this book. Only this time, she includes the experiences, not of the battlefield (or of the soldiers, or military strategies) but of quotidian spaces and struggles and of ordinary people.

Mari's experience of the war is not an uncommon one. Displacement from their own homes, the threat to their lives, foraging for food, keeping oneself alive, and mourning the dead is a collective memory that war survivors draw from. This novel brings alive the small courage people had to muster in the face of the threatening sounds of gunfire and shelling. With every bombing, they hoped for their survival in the next moment even as they tried taking refuge in whatever shelter they could get. Mari recalls:

All day long we heard the sound of shelling and mortar-fire and we knew the war in Kohima had not ended. We felt even more unhappy to think we were spending this time in the woods, without proper food, and in the dangerous situation the war posed for all of us. When would the war end? When could we go home? (Kire 2010: 68)

Such moments are just glimpses of the struggle for survival and the longing for *home* in the face of death. In its most outward form, this novel presents a fictional account of war experiences – with a plot, characters, challenges and action, and finally resolution. Yet, the emplotted historical realities in this narrative problematise a more complicit reading of this novel as fictional. Rather, as the “author” of this life-writing, Kire seems to intensify the “autobiographical pact”⁸ by drawing connections between the textual and extra-textual worlds. She not only casts real-life persons⁹ (in their own names); she also supplies extra-textual information in literalising the memories and yet calling this narrative “the book” (2010: Acknowledgements). Such devices disorient any affirmative approach to this narrative as a fictional one.

As far as the factuality of fiction is concerned – irrespective of their different conceptualisation of “employment”¹⁰ – both Paul Ricouer and Dorrit Cohn concur with each other on the *nonreferentiality* of fictional narratives. According to Ricouer, fiction can lay no claim to referentiality and relates to it as “an antonym to historical narrative” (64). Similarly, historical narrative, according to Cohn, is supported by a “stratum of testimonial evidence” in the form of “the presence of an entire ‘perigraphic’ apparatus (foot- or end-noted, prefatory or appended),” whereas fictional narrative cannot establish any correspondence with such “testimonial stratum” (115). The only concession given, perhaps, is to “historical novels” with its “referential apparatus, usually in the form of an afterword” (115).

For a community whose history of the wartimes had been transmitted in the form of memory and materials from the past, drawing connections between the events emplotted in the novel and the textual content is indeed very crucial. This novel not only establishes a continuity in transmitting the memory of the wartimes; it also positions itself as a written record of both significant events and everyday realities during the wartimes. Kire reminisces:

The nature of the war as it affected the Naga Hills was very different from anywhere else – that is what we were told in the post-war years.

Growing up in the 1960s, we played soldiers in my father's garden in Mission Compound where the wartime trenches had been left as they were....

In the 1960s, many households used British ammunition boxes as baking ovens.... By the 70s, electric ovens had replaced the ammunition boxes and no one seems to have thought they should have kept the ammo boxes for museum purposes.

In the Naga Hills, the war has stayed with us for many years after it was over. No Naga family is without its personal wartime story tell. (2020: Introduction 9)

Even as I resist correlating the characters and events with the “stratum of testimonial evidence” that marks a historical narrative (Cohn 115), one cannot ignore the stark historical realities interlaced in Mari's memory. In early 1942, Mari reports the sightings of Dakotas in the skies of Kohima; by the middle of the year, convoys of British Army began to enter the Naga hills; and by March 1943, refugees from Burma poured into Kohima, “starving, diseased dregs of humanity” (Kire 2010: 14–15, 17). A year later, in March 1944, the

“Japanese army were just days away from Kohima” (45). The new development called for immediate actions, often with personal consequences:

Since Father was a treasury officer in the district commissioner's office, he had to leave quickly for Shillong, carrying important documents and money. Most of the officers of the British army were ordered to Dimapur. (45)

On March 29, 1944, Kohima was left practically to defend itself due to what Robert Lyman calls “a serious error of judgment” made by Lieutenant-General Montagu Stopford. Dimapur being the British depot, Stopford assumed Dimapur to be the Japanese target and “ordered Ranking to withdraw 161st Brigade from Kohima immediately” (2010: 36).

When the male protectors (the soldiers) and Mari's father were summoned to another station, Victor, Mari's fiancé, moved into Mari's house. Victor's presence reassured her and her family even as the imminent invasion by the Japanese army threatened the town. With the army's withdrawal, both non-Naga traders and the locals fled to places of safety, thus leaving Kohima “like a ghost town” (Kire 2010: 45). Mari informs how Kohima was “no longer safe for civilians” (46). It was attacked by the Japanese Army on April 04, 1944, sending the “whole of Kohima ablaze” and “covered with thick black smoke” (Kire 56). Mari and her people fled to Chieswema, and then later to encampments like Chüzie and Biaku and through woods and rivers till they reached Dimapur. All the while, their encounters with the Japanese soldiers have only confirmed the “ruthlessness” they had heard about (61). Amid the clash between the two imperial armies, Mari shares her feeling of persecution and how she “felt there was no place ... safe” (68).

Seeing Kohima burn at the hands of the “enemy” and seeing the vulnerability of the remaining British soldiers, there was collective dismay. While some men derived hope knowing that despite the British Army being “routed from every direction,” Garrison Hill, Jotsoma and Zubza continued to be defended by the army; others lost hope. They felt “abandoned by the British and left at the mercy of the enemy” (Kire 2010: 76).

The fears and apprehensions of the people highlighted the divided attitude of the people towards the ongoing battle, particularly towards the British. Even as some Nagas volunteered themselves towards the cause of winning the fight against the Japanese, some cast aspersions on the British Army. Against this tide of collective despair, Mari held on to her hope that “the British forces were still there, fighting and defending Kohima” (76). However, she had her moments of doubts, like many others. Mari recounts:

It broke our spirits to see these soldiers [wounded and borne away in stretcher]. In all our years under British rule we had always looked upon the British army as invincible. How powerful the Japanese must be if they could inflict such terror upon the British. (80)

Yet, Mari's faith in the British, which had been earlier shaken by men who doubted the British intent, was restored when she was informed that “the British army never left Kohima. They are still there, fighting for every bit of land” (81). Chasie and Fecitt inform that the withdrawal of the 161st Brigade army upon the command of Stopford

almost cost the British the loyalty of the Nagas.... Luckily for the British and Allied Forces the unflinching stand of the then Deputy Commissioner, C.R. Pawsey, not to abandon Kohima and “his Nagas,” earned the loyalty of the people and saved the day for the British because all the “dobashis” [interpreters] decided to stay with him. (55)

Charles Pawsey not only remained with the Nagas even as the Japanese Army's threat became insurmountable, but he also held them together. In turn, Pawsey punished those who abandoned Kohima at its worst times:

The Marwaris ... were not allowed to return to trade in Kohima. Mr Pawsey had cancelled their permit. The reason he cited was that they had abandoned Kohima during the war, unlike the Bengali traders who had stayed on. (Kire 2010: 110)

Most Nagas extended their steadfast loyalty to the British Army and “wanted the British to win the war and chase the Japanese” out of their land (84). Such support for the British offers a counternarrative to the relationship between the British and the “mainland” India. Even as the resistance against the British was at its height by the 1940s, the Nagas in the North–East Frontier Region, a territory of the then British India, extended their allegiance more to the British than they did to their Indian counterparts.

Mari indicates the postwar developments that would heighten the resentment of the Nagas towards the Indian government. Countering the post-independent mainstream narrative that positions the Naga nationalists as anti-state, militant forces, *Mari* presents the rule of force which sought to suppress the Nagas. Mari shares the angst in

letters from home ... full of the tense situation and about the Indian army’s killing of many Nagas who were fighting for independence from India. (2010: 143)

Mari, who was then working in Digboi (Assam), could not help being reminded of the ravages of the war that had concluded a decade back, wondering “if it [Naga–Indian army conflict] was as bad as that or worse” (2010: 144). Kire probes the postwar questions further in a more nuanced manner in *A Respectable Woman* (2019) – juxtaposing the memories of the Second World War experience and the present realities of the relationship between the Indian Government and the Naga nationalists. Similar to *Mari*, Kire’s *A Respectable Woman* emplots the past and the present of Naga people and Kohima in the storytelling by Azuo, the narrator’s mother. Memories of a haunting past intertwine with the realities of present-day Nagaland; these memories present an insider’s account of the past, which not only informs but also shapes the present.

By engaging with the memories of the battle and its *aftermath* on the one hand, and with the post-war/post-independence conflicts on the other hand, Kire foregrounds important questions about how events have gone down in “history,” both in the sense of history as the past and as the written account. Kire seems to represent a corrective, alternative history to the one constructed from a dominant perspective.

The eponymous character of *Mari* takes the readers to the war-ridden Naga Hills by opening up closely-held memories of the past. At the same time, these personal memories became the premise of the revisionist history writing by Kire – one in which the struggle and the realities of the Naga people are included. *Mari* underscores the historical significance of not only the times Mari lived in; it also highlights the significance of this narrative as a revised history. In literalising Mari’s life, the history of the community and the place took centrestage. Alan Robinson argues that a historical fiction

rewrites the historical record by inserting into past actuality figures or events whose existence is fictitious or at least undocumented. But it has generally remained within the parameters of known historical facts and outcomes. (Robinson 30)

By transforming the generic convention of historical novel to the use of constructing a historico-biographical narrative, Kire evokes and interweaves memories to re-construct the history of the “forgotten war.”

Kire’s *Mari* as a hetero-emotive site

Mari holds the memory of not only Mari but also of the land and the people. It occupies an important place in evoking the collective memory of the Naga people. Kire could not have plotted this novel from her imagination. The shared spatio-temporal experiences of the people enabled the re-constitution of Kohima of the 1940s in integrating ways. As Maurice Halbwachs insightfully comments:

A remembrance is gained not merely by reconstituting the image of a past event a piece at a time. That reconstruction must start from shared data or conceptions. These are present in our mind as well as theirs, because they are continually being passed back and forth. (31)

With memories of the war dwindling; and with the spaces and remnants of objects from the bygone years diminishing, there had to be a narrative of literalised memories. For, “literature succeeds where history fails,” as literalised memory-narratives can best re-imagine the circumstances that history presents without much involvement of human elements; these literalised memories are crucial in evoking identification among survivors and familiarity among those who inherit these memories secondarily (Weissman 104). During the research work for chronicling *The Road to Kohima* (2019), the study team found

that many of the veterans and elders interviewed were already old and many were infirm.... Two things made us sad. Many Naga families did not even have a photograph of their fathers or grandfathers who fought in the war.... The second was the realization that in many cases there had been a breakdown in family communication. Children had no idea of what their fathers or grandfathers did and, in some cases, learnt with us as we interviewed the veterans. (19)

If Naga veterans' bravery during the war are barely remembered, *ordinary* women's experiences and memories certainly would have been consigned to a permanent forgetfulness had it not been for Kire's initiative to record the same. Given the perils of dying memory and the scarcity of written history of the wartimes, Kire exhorts:

You have to use what I call 'living books of history.' I interviewed many survivors and used their memories and recorded the history they carry with them. (Kolachalam)

This book, therefore, takes the form of “hetero-emotive” site – a site wherein memories confluence and coalesce. These are memories of not just Mari, of not just Kire's mother, but also of others; memories of not just the forces of the war but also the memories of Kohima, which today has least resemblance with its former self. Mari writes in the 1980s:

Kohima in the late eighties was very different from the Kohima of the fifties. It was overpopulated and no longer peaceful. The conflict [Naga-India] was still going on and it affected our daily lives. (163)

Pierre Nora propounds the inevitability of constructing “*lieux de mémoire*, sites of memory” where “memory crystallizes and secretes itself” as “*milieux de mémoire*, real environments of memory” are no longer extant (7). Paradoxically, these sites of memories are built to remind people to re-member the memories associated with a particular place or event. As hetero-emotive site, *Mari* serves to invoke readers to respond to the text and relate to the memory of the war in whatever possible ways. *Mari* has indeed drawn the interests of several young scholars from Nagaland and beyond, and the interests of people who share similar inheritances of the past. Lyman notes in the Foreword to *The Road to Kohima*:

The joint authors ... have undertaken a notable piece of scholarship, following on work by Naga historians such as Easterine Kire in *Mari* ... in bringing the voices of the hitherto unheard to our attention. (2020: 7)

Mari frames this narrative, given the dwindling memories, to do half the job Halbwachs outlines in the production of collective memory. When Kire's aunt Mari, her mother and others who had experienced the war recounted the stories of those years, it had a tangible and emotive impact on her: “It was as though an entire lost era was unfolding slowly before my eyes” (Kire viii). Kire laments:

Those times may have long gone; the old Kohima and those houses that stood on the hills may have long gone, but the mental contours of the town and the houses are all that remain. “Memories are all that remain.” (ix)

Analysing memory novels as the “lieux de mémoire” in the context of Mari’s novels, Sarkar and Gaur postulate:

Not only the Naga readers, but also the readers of Northeast Anglophone literature can draw their ideas and mental images about the Naga historical past after reading these memory novels [*Mari* and *A Respectable Woman*], which create a referential framework of remembering. (9)

This “referential framework of remembering” may therefore initiate not only an identification of similar shared experiences and pasts but also offer new modes of looking at one’s past or writings about them.

Astrid Erll rightly terms literature as a “memorial medium” that is instrumental in sustaining the collective memory of the past (2016: 112). While the Kohima War Cemetery stands proud as the “monument of a nobler time” (Kire 2010: xiii) and a fitting tribute to the memory of the slain soldiers, Kire’s *Mari* memorialises the *ordinary* courage and the lives lost during the war. *Mari* as a cultural product assumes a hetero-emotive site that calls for people to re-member and relate to the wartime experiences, even though they may not be the immediate inheritors of those memories.

Such memorialisation resonates – although from an unrelated context – Toni Morrison’s powerful evocation of the unacknowledged lives (and deaths) and memories of millions of African slaves in America. Morrison narrativises the brutalising experience of slavery in *Beloved* (1987) as a memorial to the millions of African lives lost to the making of America. Morrison, in a conversation with *The World: The Journal of the Unitarian Universalist Association* (1988), claims:

There is no place you or I can go, to think about or not think about, to summon the presences of, or recollect the absences of slaves; nothing that reminds us of the ones who made the journey and of those who did not make it. There is no suitable memorial or plaque or wreath or wall or park or skyscraper lobby.... And because such a place does not exist (that I know of), the book [*Beloved*] had to. (44)

Along these lines: as there exists no memorial to commemorate the life and death of Naga people during the war, *Mari* “had to.”

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Notes

¹ The Battle of Kohima was fought in the Naga Hills in 1944 in simultaneity with the Battle of Imphal in Manipur. This twin battle became one of the fiercest and decisive battles fought during the Second World War in China-Burma-India theatre.

² In April 2013, the National Army Museum, England, adjudged the Battle of Imphal/Kohima as “Britain’s greatest battle,” see MacSwan.

³ Some notable memoirs by former soldiers and military histories that recount the battles of Imphal and Kohima and the Burma campaign include Field-Marshal Viscount William Slim’s *Defeat into Victory: Battling Japan in Burma and India, 1942-1945* (1956); C.E. Lucas Phillips’ *Springboard to Victory: The Burma Campaign and the Battle for Kohima* (1966); Arthur Swinson’s *Kohima: The Story of the Greatest Battle Ever Fought* (1966); Louis Allen’s *Burma: The Longest War 1941-45*

- (1984); John Colvin's *Not Ordinary Men: The Story of the Battle of Kohima* (1994); D. D. Rooney's *Burma Victory: Imphal and Kohima March 1944 to May 1945* (2000); Mike Lowry's *Fighting through to Kohima: A Memoir of War in India and Burma* (2003); Jon Latimer's *Burma: The Forgotten War* (2004); Christopher Bayly and Tim Harper's *Forgotten Armies: The Fall of British Asia, 1941–1945* (2005); Leslie Edwards' *Kohima: The Furthest Battle: The Story of the Japanese Invasion of India in 1944 and the 'British-Indian Thermopylae'* (2009); William Fowler's *We Gave Our Today: Burma 1941–1945* (2009); Robert Lyman's *Kohima 1944: The Battle that Saved India* (2010); Fergal Keane's *Road of bones: The Siege of Kohima 1944* (2010)
- ⁴ In 2018, I interacted with several women and men from Manipur who survived the war and made them recount the war days for my project entitled “How Women Remember War: Unearthing Memories of the Second World War in Manipur,” funded as part of the Zubaan–Sasakawa Peace Foundation Grants for Young Researchers from the Northeast (2018). Several oral tellers recalled their wartime experiences with gusto and nostalgia.
- ⁵ Gérard Genette defines “autodiegetic” narrative as the one where “the narrator is the hero of his narrative” (245).
- ⁶ I shall be discussing the concept of emplotment in the following section.
- ⁷ Dorrit Cohn questions Hayden White's conflation of *fiction* and narrative as problematic. Cohn finds White to be one of the most “influential protagonist” of the theory that propounds the indistinguishability of historical narratives and fiction, see Cohn 8.
- ⁸ Philippe Lejeune describes the “autobiographical pact” as the agreement between the author – based on the unwritten “pledge of responsibility of a *real person*” by the virtue that he is the only one “straddling the world–beyond–the–text and the text” – and the reader (11). This pact assures that there is an actual correspondence or “*resemblance*” of identity between the author, “the narrator of the story, and the character who is being talked about” (11–13).
- ⁹ Charles Pawsey, the District Commissioner of Kohima; Reverend Supplee, the American Missionary; Neilhouzhü, the first Naga doctor; and Lhuviniu Lungalang, one of the first Naga graduates are some of the distinguished historical personages who figure in this narrative.
- ¹⁰ Paul Ricouer identifies emplotment – “the organization of the events” – as a paradigm common to both historical and fictional narrative, see Ricouer 34. Whereas, Dorrit Cohn defines emplotment as a process which is applicable only for history writing and not for fictions, see Cohn 114.

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