

WRITING LIVES: A NARRATIVE HERMENEUTIC READING OF EASTERINE KIRE'S *MARI* AND *A NAGA VILLAGE REMEMBERED*

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Abstract

*The blurring of the genres of fiction and non-fiction is a distinctive feature in many of the contemporary Naga writings in English. Writers often draw from “real” people of “real” historical events. The claims to verisimilitude in these kinds of narratives can be understood in the light of the context in which these texts have been written. In the absence or dearth of written records of significant periods of Naga history, such works offer subversive and alternate versions of Naga history. This paper suggests that taking a narrative hermeneutic approach in the reading of Kire's *Mari* and *A Naga Village Remembered* offers insights into how rather than fiction and history being antithetical or incompatible, they can be read as being complementary and even augmenting the understanding of the other. Such an approach further enriches our understanding of the value and role that contemporary literature plays in the formation of a sense of collective identity.*

Keywords: *Narrative Hermeneutics, Memory, Identity, Naga Writings in English, Easterine Kire*

Introduction

One distinctive feature about many contemporary Naga writings in English is the blurring or blending of the genres of fiction and non-fiction. Writers often draw from “real” historical events and write about the lives of “real” people. A novel like Easterine Kire's *Mari* (2010), for instance, is based on the life of the writer's aunt Mari and her experiences through World War II. Based heavily on the diary of her aunt, *Mari* appears to challenge the limits of life-writing and raises interesting questions about how this novel destabilizes the genres of fiction and history. Similarly, *A Naga Village Remembered* (2003), Kire's famous first novel and also the first novel written in English by a Naga writer, also straddles history and fiction. Based on the Battle of Khonoma, the last Naga

resistance against the British, Kire brings to life an almost forgotten but significant period of Naga history. In such works, the “centrality of plausibility and verisimilitude” (Dalley 2014, 52) must be read as more than just a literary style of writing but one that is deeply informed by the contexts in which they have been written. While both these novels can be understood as “fictions of memory” (Neumann 2008, 334), conflating history and such fictions of memory may be erroneous. The claims to verisimilitude in these kinds of narratives can be understood in the light of the context in which these texts have been written and what they seek to represent. Both these novels deal with significant periods of Naga history that have been marked by the absence or dearth of written records, and hence, face the danger of being forgotten. Both deal

with the stories of lived experiences of ordinary people that are in danger of being effaced from collective memory. This paper is an attempt to analyze the two novels and argue that in reading them, we come to understand that rather than viewing fiction and history as antithetical or incompatible, a more fruitful engagement comes about when fiction and history are understood as being complementary to each other, in that one augments the reading of the other.

Viewed through the critical lens of Memory Studies, we find that such writings like *Mari* or *A Naga Village Remembered* can be read as life narratives that feed into the cultural memory of the community. Such a perspective helps us recognize these texts as narratives that shape the cultural memory and thereby, identity of a people. In his essay “Life-Writing, Cultural Memory, and Literary Studies,” Max Saunders argues that the destabilization of genres rather than being a problem can be viewed as an opportunity. He suggests that if other genres of writing like novels, poems, short stories, etc. can be read as life-writing, then their potential “as routes into cultural memory” can be realized (2008, 322). History, as it is recorded in official records, only serve as the backdrop in the telling of these stories. A common thread that runs through all these narratives and binds them together is the ways in which they each foreground the importance of the stories of ordinary people.

The Values of Naga literature: A Narrative Hermeneutic Approach

Over the past few decades, the term “narrative” has become as ubiquitous as it has become indispensable. There has also been what is called a “narrative turn” that has extended beyond the

field of the humanities where there has been a foregrounding of the idea that humans, across cultures, understand themselves and the world they inhabit in terms of narrative. This turn indicates a significant shift. Hanna Meretoja notes this shift as one that underscores the importance of literature. She explains that not only does literature play a “pivotal role” but the narrative turn “entails seeing literary narratives as crucial to the process by which we interpret ourselves and our situation in the world” (2014, 2). Since the 1980s, narrative theory has also undergone what is termed “the ethical turn”. This has been the result of an interest in narrative from the field of moral philosophy and a growing interest in the interrelationship of ethics and literature. Ethics and the novel form in particular seemed a good fit because both concerns with reflections on human action, character, conflicts and desires, that presents moral dilemmas to the readers, etc. This ethical turn has brought about a shift in the discourse around the value and the role played by literature in any society. In recent decades, there has been the emergence of narrative hermeneutics, a discipline combining narrative studies that is informed by a philosophical hermeneutic approach. Meretoja offers a theoretical-analytical framework of narrative hermeneutics exploring the complex interplay of narratives in our lives, one that acknowledges both the ethical potential of narratives as well as the risks of storytelling (Meretoja 2018, 2). As practices of sense-making, narrative is always embedded in our social and historical webs of understanding. She writes,

Each cultural and historical world functions as a *space of possibilities* that encourages certain modes of experience,

thought, and action, and discourages or disallows others, and stories play a constitutive role in establishing the limits of these worlds- both enabling experience and delimiting it. (2018, 2)

From this theoretical outlook, we understand that narratives operate within this space, and directly deals with what she terms, our “sense of the possible.” Meretoja elaborates that narrative, especially fiction, can not only help see the past in a new light but also helps imagine what is to come. This is what she means by the “sense of the possible.” She writes, “Such exploration cultivates our understanding of where we come from, where we are now and where we could go. This in turn, affects who we in fact are” (Meretoja 2018, 5). Taking a narrative hermeneutic approach towards reading many of the contemporary Naga fiction in fact helps in appreciating the value and role of the growing field of creative writings in Nagaland, especially in understanding the relationship between such writings and the formation of a sense of collective identity. Memory, history and identity are, after all, deeply connected to one another.

Writing Mari

Kire bases her novel on the life of Mari or Khrielievü Mari O'Leary, her maternal aunt. The Japanese invasion of the Naga Hills in 1944 serves as an important backdrop to the story. The narrative begins with Mari, in her old age, finding her diary as she cleans her attic. As she begins reading, the “mad whirl of living, living and dying” of the war years unfold. The Second World War has been largely undocumented in Naga history because it was largely considered to be a war that was not theirs (Chasie and Fecitt 2017). However, the significance of the war

especially in the ways in which it changed the Naga society and led to the shaping of a collective Naga identity has been acknowledged. The Battle of Kohima, as it came to be known, was fought from 4 April to 22 June in 1944. It was a decisive battle of the Burma Campaign. In later years, it has come to be known as the “Stalingrad of the East”, and the Battle of Kohima has even been commemorated as “Britain's Greatest Battle”. War, however, serves as the backdrop in the novel. It is, as Kire states in the Author's note, “the story of Kohima and its people” (2010, xii).

The narrative spans the time starting from February 1943 down to 1998. War seemed unlikely and a distant probability to Mari when they first hear rumours of the advancing Japanese army. Living with her family of seven, we get a glimpse of life in pre-war Kohima through the life of young Mari:

In these pre-war years, there was a steady rhythm to our lives in our little town. Every morning we saw the same sights. On our way to school, we met the villagers of Kohima on their way to the fields. They carried their spades and daos in their baskets. Their terraced fields lay both east and west of the village. Every evening, as they returned home, we exchanged greetings (2010, 14).

The narrative is interspersed with accounts of real persons, real places and real events like the first time when aeroplanes were seen, Dakotas on their way to the British airfield in Imphal, flying over the Kohima skies. The nuances of the experience of living through a period of transition are captured through the account of people's lived experiences. By 1943, they

witness droves of Burmese refugees entering Kohima which were “the first sights of what war could do to humanity.” The school that was run by the Baptist mission under Rev. Supplee closes down, and “normal” life as they knew it begin to rapidly change. In the novel, we find instances of tender moments in the midst of wartime, like Mari falling in love with Staff Sergeant Victor or Vic, happiness amid uncertainty and sorrows, hope amid loss and despair as Kohima and the people become caught up in a war that they did not invite. Mari and her family, like others in the village and town, go into hiding, having become refugees in their own land. They go through periods of hunger as they resort to scavenge for edible herbs found in the woods. Mari suffers a great loss as news of the death of her fiancé Vic arrive. By the end of the battle, the face of Kohima is unrecognizable, and in many ways, so were her people. Villages surrounding Kohima like Viswema, Khuzama, Phesama and Jakhama were also heavily bombed. With hardly any houses left standing, the debris of war and dead bodies of soldiers littered the roads. The novel recounts the memories of people as they began to pick themselves up and rebuild their homes, this time with tin and corrugated iron roofing, and life slowly limped back to normal.

Mari, even though it is based on a personal diary, can be said to represent the collective experiences of a community. By drawing on a private mode of writing- the diary, written by a young Naga woman, Kire legitimizes not only her story but also the genre. Diaries, as reliable accounts of history, are usually doubted owing to the subjective nature of the genre. Such subjective accounts do not figure much in official historiography. However, Kire's choice to rely on it says much about the privileging of the

specific experiences of people as legitimate and insightful in our understanding of the past. The history of what happened to the people of Kohima is remembered not through traditional authority figures, nor through “authoritative” texts, but through young Mari and her diary. A novel like *Mari*, is subversive in the ways in which it not only questions notions of legitimacy but also that of what can or cannot be considered as “literature”. Aparna Lanjewar Bose, in her introduction to *Writing (Them)Selves: Women's Autobiographies around the World*, points out that life writings have emerged as “a major source of collective memory, some qualifying as social and literary documentations of alternate histories and resistance movements thereby debunking available dominant histories recorded by privileged groups of historians” (2020, 28). By drawing from a form and a source that are not traditionally privileged, Kire offers an alternate reading of this period of Naga history.

The novel also raises interesting questions, as even if it is considered to be a work of fiction, the entire narrative, starting with Mari, are real historical figures. Thus, it is a novel that resists being easily categorized as just fiction or history. The author's note, with details about the writer's relationship with Mari, her mention of the interviews and phone calls it took for her to get the details right, and the detailed historical account of the battle of Kohima undermine the novel's fictionality. *Mari* transforms “the generic convention of historical novel to the use of constructing a historico-biographical narrative” (Devi 2021, 40). Hamish Dalley explains that such claims to historical referentiality that are appended to historical novels establish “plausibility and potential verifiability” as “key

criteria against which the representation asks to be read” (2014, 54). According to Dalley, this feature of realism, what he calls “paratextual framing”, is something that has not been properly addressed in the postcolonial study of historical novels because the popular trend in postcolonial readings of novels ignores “the ethical commitments to historical plausibility routinely expressed by many postcolonial novelists” (2014, 53). A novel like *Mari* gains in significance because even if it is written in the genre of the fictional novel, the historical referentiality of the narrative makes the story plausible. Further, Kire's “ethical commitment to historical plausibility” must be understood as a specific response to fill the void between the present and the past of which not much is known. For one, the writer has an ethical commitment to her aunt to represent her life with as much authenticity as she can. The writer also has the ethical responsibility to present a period of history of her people that has been so significant in determining not only the course of their history but also the shaping of the collective identity of her people- a task that comes with great pressure and expectations. It is interesting that a text like *Mari* is subversive on many levels as it invites critical reflections on considering personal or individual narratives to be as valid testaments of the past as official historical records are. Further, it is the account of a young woman that is hence privileged, thus legitimizing such traditionally marginalized figures.

Remembering a Naga Village

A Naga Village Remembered, published in 2003, has the distinction of being the first novel to have been written by a Naga writer in the English language. The Naga village that is

“remembered” in the novel is the Western Angami village of Khonoma. This village has come to be of historical importance, not just for the Angamis but for the Nagas as a whole. In the years between 1832 and 1880, Khonoma put up a fierce resistance against the British raids into their lands. The novel records in accurate detail these events, especially that of the Battle of Khonoma. However, as much as the novel is based on this history, what shines through is the depiction of the lives of the people before the colonial encounters that would completely change their world forever. The novel is deeply embedded in the culture of the people. The rituals, festivals, social taboos, village history, and various aspects that defined the people's sense of identity are interwoven into the narrative in minute detail. Drawing heavily from the oral tradition, the novel is a counternarrative to the “grand narrative of history by the colonizer” (Elizabeth 2017, 27).

In the introduction to the novel, Kire gives a detailed historical account of the events leading up to the Battle of Khonoma. The first incursions into the hills began in the 1800s. Led by Captain Jenkins and Captain Pemberton, the first expeditions made by the British into the Naga Hills began in 1832. Encroaching upon Angami territory was met with fierce resistance from the warriors of Khonoma. It is recorded that since 1839, under Lieutenant E.R. Grange, punitive expeditions were started. In the process, the village houses were frequently burnt down. In subsequent years, there were many such expeditions and retaliatory attacks from both sides. The killing of the Political Agent Mr. Damant in 1879 led to a major attack on the village. After a long siege for four months, in March 1880, a verbal treaty between the British

and Khonoma representatives ended the conflict. Khonoma was completely burnt down. It was only after a year that the dispersed villagers could come back and rebuild their village once again. Soon, with the arrival of the American Baptist missionaries, conversions started to take place, which was initially met with ostracism. However, in the span of just a few decades, the life world of the people underwent tremendous changes.

The cultural life of the village is given prime importance in the novel. The characters are deeply defined by the social codes of conduct and religious beliefs. Spanning over three generations, the narrative focuses on Kovi, his sister Vipiano, her son Levi, and Levi's sons, Roko and Savi. From the beginning, the narrative delves readers into the community life defined by strict adherence to a system that informed every area of an individual's life. The day-to-day affairs of the village are depicted in careful detail. For instance, the centrality of "thehou" or community house in the cultural life of the village. This was where stories would be passed down from one generation to the other, and there was great value in being known as a "thehou no" or "child of the thehou". There are other instances of community life like the Feast of Merit that is told through characters like Keviselie, detailing the rituals involved in this unique practice where a rich man earns favour and status in the village by giving the feast of merit and dispersing all his wealth. The observance of genna days, beliefs and practices concerning births, marriages and deaths are also interspersed in the narrative.

When Levi and his clansmen are intercepted by the British while on their way back after an inter-village feud, they are beaten and taken to Tezpur

Jail. This incident brings Levi great sorrow and a changed perspective as he is faced with the obvious might of those who spoke a different language of power. By the time Levi returns back to the village six years later, he could not view the village with the same eyes as before. Everything looked smaller. The impact of the encounter with the world outside is told through Levi. The growing mistrust of the white man and his government in subsequent years is given a lot of context. Kire's narrative offers a corrective to official history, that it was not a savage people just performing random attacks on the British. Understood against the life world that they belonged to, and how much they valued that way of life, we gain a deeper understanding of the history of the battle and see it in a much better light. On 14 October 1897, the political agent, Mr. Damant left for Khonoma, determined to bring the defiant village into submission. Kire mentions in the introduction that according to oral narratives, the interpreter in Jotsoma where the convoy had halted, fell in front of Damant and begged him not to proceed (Kire 2018, xii). Damant proceeds and gets killed. The killing of Damant greatly emboldened the villagers to descend on the Kohima garrison under G.J. Cawley, the District Superintendent of Police and Assistant Police Officer. They wanted to oust the British for good. The novel seeks to set the record straight by writing history from the perspective of the Nagas: "Paradoxically, Cawley felt, too the justness of the attack for they had occupied Angami lands, cut down their forests, taxes them and forced them into labour which they hated" (Kire 2018, 90-91). However, on hearing the news that Colonel Johnstone was approaching with 2000 troops from Manipur, the warriors ceased the attack on Kohima, and chose

to retreat rather than face a massacre. On 22 November 1879, the British with their singular aim to crush Khonoma launched a major offensive. The village held out against the British until both sides agreed to come to terms with a treaty. General Nation insists on the elder Pelhu to come as the representative of the village. When General Nation asks Pelhu if they needed a written treaty, Pelhu shakes his head firmly. He replies, 'If we have said there will be peace between us, there will be peace. We do not need to write it down'" (Kire 2018, 107). The Naga culture, as in other oral cultures of the world, placed high value to the spoken word. Words were not taken lightly. Kire supplements the novel with oral narratives of the Semo clan and narratives of the Khwünomia, narrated to her by different people. As a novel that straddles both fiction and history, *A Naga Village Remembered*, much like *Mari*, fills the gaps in official historical accounts of this period in Naga history.

To further reiterate the point, in the later half of the novel, the narrative shifts its focus to Sato, Levi's younger son, and his decision to convert into a Christian. In chapter 14 of the novel, we encounter Dr. Sidney Rivenburg, a real historical figure. Rivenburg, trained as a doctor, had served as a missionary for forty-two years. In 1936, on hearing about his death, Niser, the first Angami convert, in a letter of condolence, fondly gave him the title "Star of the Naga Hills". In the novel, Sato begins his education with Rivenburg. Known to the Angamis as "Chaha Ketsau" or the old sahib, Rivenburg was known for his strict and austere ways, especially in his dealings with his students. Sato finds favour with him and begins to consider accepting the new faith. Through the way of fiction, Kire brings out the inner tensions and conflicts that early

converts like Sato must have undergone. As he neared the time of his initiation into the religion of his father and grandfather, the "gentleness of the man Chaha called Isu and the longing to be back at school" only makes Sato consider becoming a Christian. The novel also depicts the baptism of the first man in Khonoma, Nisier, in 1897. Sato's inner turmoil is similar to Chinua Achebe's depiction of Nyowe in *Things Fall Apart*. In both novels the dilemma of the sons, as they are caught between wanting to convert and the fear of rejection from their fathers, is played out. For Nyowe, it is the "poetry of the new religion, something felt in the marrow" (Achebe 2010, 139), while for Sato, it was the "incredible sweetness" (Kire 2018, 122) that attracted them to the new religion. Through her fiction, Kire elaborates on Sato's understanding that the old religion and the new were not "diametrically opposed to each other". Sato thought of all the chicken sacrifices as typologies of Christ. He understood the new religion, much like the old, as binding them by taboos but by "taboos that had meaning." Sato wishes that his father would see the new religion as "a fulfillment of the old-answering questions that the old was struggling with, and giving meaning to the feasts, and to life as the villages knew it and lived it." (Kire 2018, 123) These lines are poignant not only because the fictional narrative gives a face to the many early converts who would have faced similar dilemmas, but in the light of how unrepresented they are or appearing only as mere statistics in historical records even when they do, the writer imbues them with a sense of agency. Even when caught between forces that were much beyond their comprehension- colonialism and its other civilizing projects, Sato could choose for himself the path that he wished to take.

Conclusion

Rather than being in opposition, fiction, thus, actively augments historical imagination. The approach of narrative hermeneutics is useful in getting past the fact/fiction debate. The philosophical hermeneutics of Paul Ricoeur places great importance on the role of fiction and the ways in which it can shape our lives. In *Oneself as Another* (1992), Ricoeur refers to literature as “the great laboratory” where we can explore “in the realms of good and evil” (1992, 164). Meretoja and Lyytikäinen also argue that the ethical value of literature cannot be separated from the ways in which our identities are shaped by literature (2015, 10). Rather than literature directly presenting moral truths, literature invites us to see “the sense of the possible” (Ibid, 10). Rather than understanding this ethical potential from a simplistic viewpoint of readers identifying with literary characters, narrative hermeneutics argues for a more nuanced understanding of this process, in that both form and content play a role. It is not simply identification with literary characters but identification with the interpretation of the world that readers encounter in literary works. Novels like *Mari* or *A Naga Village Remembered* are significant in the ways in which they invite readers to have a profound engagement with history. By choosing the fictional mode, Kire is able to include details of everyday people and emplot them in the narrative world. She is able to fill the gaps that historical accounts, of say, the Battle of Khonoma, do not. Historical writing is bound to present only facts. In recalling the past, it is bound to representing past events and historical figures with accuracy. However, through the fictional mode, Kire succeeds in achieving so much more. Fiction and non-fiction

complement each other and makes for a more enriching understanding of the past.

Such storytelling must be understood as a form of resistance and a reclamation of the right to tell our own stories in our own ways. Kire has often invoked Fanon in stating that there is a need for Nagas to decolonize their thinking. While such a positioning can be interpreted as a postcolonial reaction, it is also important to recognize the ways in which these narratives articulate a unique Naga response in resisting and defining their identity through stories. In his essay “Life in Quest of Narrative”, Ricoeur explains that a text is “the projection of a new universe distinct from that in which we live” by which he means that a text, contrary to structuralist thought, is not self-contained or closed in on itself (1991, 25). He further explains that to read a work means to allow ourselves to be open to the world that the text projects. To read and understand a text is to let the horizon of the text and that of our own fuse together. Engaging with such texts as the ones discussed above is to engage with the world that they project. All these narratives offer us “a possible way into understanding that which is absent” (Rigney 2001, 25). In the absence of written records of the past, these narratives help the readers in the present to have a more tangible understanding of the past. Even though some of the narratives only seem as fragments, they give “a face, a name, and a story” (Eakin 2020, 3) to the unrecorded past and thus, renders it more legible and more meaningful.

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