



Vol. 11, No. 2
CLRI May 2024

Page 36-47

Remembering through retelling: An analysis of Easterine Kire's fiction

Lalthansangi Ralte

Assistant Professor, Department of English, Govt. J. Thankima College, Aizawl.

Abstract

This paper will bring forth the memory of a community that has seen immense death and heartbreak as a result of wars and political unrest in the region. Easterine Kire is a poet and novelist who has written extensively on her people, the Nagas. Kire mainly writes about the Angami Nagas in her works of fiction, which are mostly based on real-life events. Her novels *Mari* (2010), *A Respectable Woman* (2019) and *Bitter Wormwood* (2011) will be taken into study. In these three novels, Easterine Kire tells the story of her people, how they fought the “white-man’s war” and the Naga insurgency against the Indian union in their struggle to be a free state. The latter part of the paper will focus on the task of the writer, how s/he has to write about the unadulterated history of their people. The task of writing “ourselves/themselves” thus becomes a combined effort of the writer and the people when collective memories are recollected and put in print for future generations. This paper also acts as a detailed review of the mentioned three novels of Easterine Kire while discussing matters such as memory, history and trauma. The last part of the paper focuses on Easterine Kire’s reflections on her own novel *Bitter Wormwood* and her purpose of writing the novel.

Keywords: Memory, history, Battle of Kohima, NNC, factional groups, misrepresentation, cease-fire, peace talks, collective memory.

Easterine Kire is a poet and novelist who has written extensively on her people, the Nagas. Kire mainly writes about the Angami Nagas in her works of fiction, which are mostly based on real-life events. Her novels *Mari* (2010), *A Respectable Woman* (2019) and *Bitter Wormwood* (2011) will be taken into study. Easterine Kire re-writes in English the memory of her people; she puts into print the “history” of her

people and thereby becomes the memory-keeper of her people. Niebuhr's philosophy of history states that –

History...enables us to recognize how unaware even the greatest and highest spirits of our human race have been of the chance nature of the form assumed by the eyes through which they see and through which they compel everyone to see. (Jacobson 240)

The quoted lines bring forth the main idea or subject matter of the three selected novels which show the drastic change brought forth in the lives of a people living in a secluded part of India. In her novel *Mari*, Easterine tells the story of a young Angami Naga woman who fell in love with a British officer during the Battle of Kohima where the British fought against the Japanese in Kohima. This battle was fought from April 4th to June 22nd, 1944. Even though “the war”, as it was referred to as by the Nagas, took place roughly for a period of two and a half months, it was the first time the Nagas were brought face to face with war. Kire brings together history, real-life and fiction in the above mentioned novel. A peaceful community was made to encounter misery and death, starvation and diseases. In times of war, the female body is seen as a political battleground; it is seen as an object whereby the enemy's body is dishonoured. The beauty of the women had to be hidden by smearing ash on their faces and making them wear old and faded clothes. Atrocious stories of rape were unheard of among the Nagas before the coming of the Japanese soldiers. Mari and her family had to flee from their home in Kohima as the Japanese troops had reached Kohima. After fleeing from the village of Chieswema, they had to flee to the forests as the Japanese troops kept moving into the interior villages. Food became scarce and everyone, the young and old, had to search for food in the forests. There was never enough to share with others; and so, a people who were taught to first give the

better shares of food to others could no longer share their food with others. Mari was united with her family after the war but her lover Victor, a Staff Sergeant of the British Army, died in the war.

Easterine Kire's novel *Mari* is not just about the love story of Mari; it narrates the story of the Nagas. Kire wrote that her people have very little memory of what they were doing before the war years; she even referred to it as "the big bang, the beginning of all life" (*Mari* viii). Her novel *A Respectable Woman* started in the aftermath of the war. The protagonist's mother, Khonuo, was only ten years old when the Japanese invaded Nagaland in 1944. With the departure of the British from the Naga hills in 1947, reality sets in. Leaders of the Naga National Council protested and refused to join the Indian Union. In *Bitter Wormwood*, Easterine Kire writes of the Naga people's memory of Gandhi. Before his assassination on 30th January, 1948, Mahatma Gandhi had met a group of Nagas and asked them how he could help them. Among the Nagas, Mahatma Gandhi was a true leader as he "understood the rights of all human beings" and told them that they had every right to be independent from India (*Bitter Wormwood* 48). Gandhi's death was a great loss to the Nagas. The Naga freedom struggle was countered by the Indian government by sending in armed police to suppress the freedom movement. Kethonuo, the protagonist of *A Respectable Woman*, narrated the act of violence committed on her people, where even the young and old died of starvation and beatings. She said, "We were no longer safe in our own homes...it was like a whole generation of men disappeared because they were all killed, one after the other...Life was so much worse than it was during the Japanese war...British and Indian soldiers came by the thousands but we never feared them; we knew they were there to protect our lands. But now people had grown to fear the sight of the Indian soldiers" (58-59). The Naga men were committed to fight for their land; before Christianity entered

their lands, they would always feel obligated to avenge the killing of a family member. This spirit of avenging the death of a loved one still burnt in the hearts of the Nagas. In expressing the willingness of the Naga men to lay down their lives for their homeland, Kire puts forth the question – “Was it because it was so close to the Japanese war where they had witnessed men laying down their lives to defend Kohima against the invaders?” (62). Life was harder for the wives of the men who had gone to join the Underground army as they had to singlehandedly take care of their children.

Collective Memory of a People

...the phrase ‘collective memory’ proposes that practices of remembrance are shaped and reinforced by the societies and cultures in which they occur. (Rossington and Whitehead 134)

Easterine Kire through her novels and stories “shapes and reinforces” the collective memory of her people. Her novel *Bitter Wormwood* narrates the evolution of “the war that they’d begun with India more than 60 years ago (which) was a just war” (10). This novel opens in the year 2007 and recaps the Naga freedom movement right from the beginning. Mose, the protagonist of the novel, thought to himself, “It had not begun like that...Memories flooded Mose’s mind as he sat out on the porch. No, it had not been like that at all” (12). The entry of the Indian soldiers to suppress the Naga freedom movement rekindled the memories of “the war” years among the elder members of the society. Neituo, Mose’s friend, said that his father told him that even during the Japanese war they had sent only half the number of Indian soldiers to Nagaland. The curfews and village groupings were so terrible and traumatising that memories of the war years were seen as much better. Easterine Kire’s stories portray the turbulent years of trauma and bloodshed that made up the history of the

Nagas from the nineteen forties to the turn of the twenty-first century. The Naga National Council led by Phizo was the first group to dissent in 1947 and it was in 1956 that they went underground. Kire tries to re-embrace and re-tell the memory of a people who has for a long period gone unacknowledged. The process of memory in human beings involves not only the establishment of traces, but the re-reading of these traces (Le Goff 52). It is the 'common' individual who is most affected by war and social unrest and it is the experience of these individuals which is found vividly in their 'memory'. Mose and Neituo joined the Naga underground as the atrocities committed on Naga civilians by the Indian army increased; Mose's grandmother, Khrienuo, who was working peacefully in their field was shot dead by the Indian Army. Nothing could be done about this ruthless killing as "the law" protected the soldier – "He was protected by the Assam Maintenance of Public Order Act 1953. The Act empowered a soldier to 'shoot and kill, in case it is felt necessary to do so for maintaining of public order'" (*Bitter Wormwood* 73). In the year 1963, Nagaland was made a state in the Indian Union. This angered many in the underground who did not want to be a state in India. By then, Mose and Neituo were no longer with the underground army. Mose's mother, Vilau, was very sick with stomach cancer and she passed away soon after he married Neilhounuo. They had a daughter named Sabunuo. By the time Sabunuo attended school, there were many changes in Nagaland. In 1972, new laws were introduced whereby the Indian politicians tightened the noose after giving the Nagas statehood. On February 4th, 1973, there was a huge explosion at Ruby Cinema Hall where many were injured. The sound of the explosion and the scene of people running amok in fear and anguish resurrected the memories of the fear that the people had lived with in the war years and in the 1950s. In the 1970s, there were still many, including Mose and Neituo, who

had never voted at the state elections. In their minds, the memory of the forced elections of 1952 was still vivid.

Bitter Wormwood narrates the lives of people who had been in the Underground Army and how people who were no longer in the Underground Army were seen as traitors. The fear of being on a list of people who were in the Underground is also clearly depicted in this novel. The various factional groups created huge problems and the people were filled with fear, not just because of the ruthless Indian army but also the various underground factions who took the law into their own hands. Sabunuo and Vilalhou, Neituo's son, were married in December 1986. A few months after their wedding, Vihi, a part time businessman who did contract work was shot dead on the main road. It was later found out that he had had dealings with a factional group. The horrified people ran off in different directions while the killer ran down the road with his gun "held high". The fear was so immense that "No one tried to stop him...No one knew how to fight the wave of crime, because it was too easy to be targeted and hounded by the factions" (164). Since the 1950s, murder continues to be committed in broad daylight in Nagaland. Easterine Kire, through her stories, shows how –

Memory is the raw material of history. Whether mental, oral, or written, it is the living source from which historians draw. Because its workings are usually unconscious, it is in reality more dangerously subject to manipulation by time and by societies given to reflection than the discipline of history itself (Le Goff xi-xii)

In *Bitter Wormwood*, Kire writes about the misrepresentation of the Naga movement by the Indian press, how the journalist of a newspaper had reported that "the Naga insurgents actively received help from the civilian population who donated money to their cause" (164). The Naga struggle

for independence has been reduced to a mere story, stories which haven't been verified. Easterine Kire also brings to light the trauma of the soldier who returned from a Northeast posting. It is written that he "went berserk and shot his officer...Think of the psychological damage they undergo when they have seen what we have seen. People killed like cattle, the same people they had been told were their fellow citizens. It must leave them with a terrible weight on their conscience afterwards" (165). Pierre Nora writes, "Memory is a perpetually actual phenomenon, a bond tying us to the eternal present" (Rossington and Whitehead 146). The memory, the experiences of the Nagas in the same manner is a "perpetually actual phenomenon." Easterine Kire's depiction of the "State terrorism" (*Bitter Wormwood* 171) in Nagaland where the Armed Forces Special Powers Act (AFSPA) protected the many Indian soldiers who had shot dead innocent civilians. The important question is, "Why the hell is the AFSPA still in force if there is a ceasefire? That itself is proof that the ceasefire and the peace talks don't mean anything to the Indian government." (172)

The task of writing ourselves

In a personal online interview on 13th October, 2020 Easterine Kire shared her thoughts and reasons for writing *Bitter Wormwood*. She said that there is always pressure on a writer to write about politics, and especially about the political history of a people. But the truth is that she wrote it as a cathartic experience. In the Nagaland that she grew up in, all of life seemed to be permeated by politics and the nationalistic movement to make Nagas free. She shared her life, how she lived through the tragedy of factional fighting and killings among her own people. The division of people on the basis of ideology and Chinese Marxism was the greatest tragedy to befall the Naga people. Easterine Kire said, "The way I wrote

Bitter Wormwood was to try to live through the lives of the people first affected by the Naga freedom struggle, which we also refer to as the Naga movement. I had, by that time, worked a great deal on the political movement via data collection from oral narrators who had lived the struggle. Mose has a real life model in an uncle of mine who is still alive. So the real Mose is 85 and living in Kohima.” Easterine Kire tells how she collected the memories of people from Mose’s age group, people who were born in the 1930s and 1940s in Nagaland. It was the sharing of those memories that enabled her to write about the most frightening experience of her people, a time when the Indian army arrested, tortured and killed Nagas on a huge scale, and burnt granaries and villages. For an ordinary villager who had no idea about the world beyond his village world and the whole intricacy of what politics meant, it was the most frightening experience. Those were the ones Easterine Kire said that she really felt for. Her ambition was to write their stories, and to present the Naga story from their viewpoint, and not from a political leader's perspective. This book of “shared memories” is Kire’s way of narrating what her people experienced at the hands of the Indian army that led them to take up arms to defend their lands. She said, “This book is by way of helping today's children to understand the past that their grandparents and parents lived through. Many of the incidents I write about are a kind of harvesting of public memory. Different generations could remember the events that are documented in the book. I interviewed an Indian police officer posted to the Naga Hills in the early sixties, when the fighting was still going on. The Indian police were all armed and focused on suppressing the freedom struggle by intimidation of the public. One example my mother remembered was the killing of two Naga leaders and displaying their bodies in public for two days or so and forcing people to come and watch. The people were told they would meet the same fate if they opposed the Indian

government.” A very good documentation of shared memory exists in the records of the Naga National Council (NNC), “the original group fighting for Naga freedom” (Kire’s words). The attacks on villages, groupings of villages, names of men and women, children killed by the Indian army, women raped, grain destroyed, houses burnt, are all recorded by the NNC and kept in massive files. The author made great use of this treasury of shared memory which was a great resource in writing the book.

The history of the Nagas was written by the white man who served as political officers in Nagaland. They wrote their interpretation, their view of the Naga people which differed in many ways from the lived reality of the people. It is when the historians and colonisers write a wrong account of the land and its people that the task of writing about themselves falls on the people. The natives now have to write the accounts and stories of their people in the language of the colonisers. In an article “Shared memory: The project of writing ourselves”, Easterine Kire writes, “British anthropologists who were fascinated by our cultures, and wrote about our customs which they did not understand, did not hesitate to use the adjectives barbaric and savage, to describe our ways. We accepted those definitions of our civilisations. We accepted them by not questioning them but by choosing to believe that our cultural practices were in actuality, savage and primitive, and that our methods of educating our children were not as good as the colonizer’s way. We participated in psychological colonisation by accepting their definition of us.” It is when the natives, the insiders of a culture, write about their knowledge and lived experiences that “authentic” history will be written down. For a culture whose understanding goes “even beyond the written word”, the task of story-telling has to be taken on by the native. Memories, especially collective memory, have to be preserved for future generations, generations that won’t

care about it until they become middle aged and suddenly realise the importance of an authentic history/tale.

References

1. Jacobson, N.P. 'Niebuhr's Philosophy of History' in *The Harvard Theological Review*. Cambridge University Press, October, 1944.
2. Le Goff, Jacques. *History and Memory*. Columbia University Press, 1992.
3. Kire, Easterine. *Mari*. Harper Collins Publishers India, 2010.
4. Kire, Easterine. *Bitter Wormwood*. Zubaan, 2011.
5. Kire, Easterine. "Shared memory: The project of writing ourselves" in *Shared Memories, Creating Pathways* published in the AKD Silver Jubilee Souvenir magazine, 2014.
6. Kire, Easterine. *A Respectable Woman*. Zubaan, 2019.
7. Rossington, Michael and Whitehead, Anne. eds. *The Theories of Memory A Reader*. The John Hopkins University Press, 2007.
8. Online interview with Dr. Easterine Kire on 13th October, 2020 from 8PM to 9PM IST.

Lalthansangi Ralte

Lalthansangi Ralte finished her M. Phil and PhD from the Center for English Studies at Jawaharlal Nehru University, New Delhi. Her areas of interest are Writings from Northeast India, Indian Writings in English, Translation Studies and Gender Studies. She has worked extensively on Literatures from Northeast India, on themes of gender, identity, representation, culture, memory, language and indigeneity. She is presently teaching at Govt. J. Thankima College in Aizawl.

[Get Your Book Reviewed](#)

If you have got any book published and are looking for a book review, contact us. We provide book review writing service for a fee. We (1) write book review (2) publish review in CLRI (3) conduct an interview with the author (4) publish interview in CLRI. [Know more here](#).

[Authors & Books](#)

We publish book releases, Press Release about books and authors, book reviews, blurbs, author interviews, and any news related to authors and books for free. We welcomes authors, publishers, and literary agents to send their press releases. Visit our website <https://page.co/Vw17Q>.