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Representation of 'Home' in Easterine Kire's *Mari*

Abstract

Northeast Indian literature includes a diverse range of themes and critical issues such as the search of identity, displacement, marginalization and insurgency. As a pioneer of English fiction writer in Nagaland, Easterine Kire has been able to place herself in a remarkable position as a chronicler and preserver of her history and cultural heritage. Her novels are written as an attempt to tell the forgotten stories of the land and its people. As a postcolonial writer her works are directed towards reclaiming the history of Nagaland by recreating the idea of 'home' through her fictions. By incorporating the ideas of post colonialism this paper aims to see how Kire captures the complexities of belonging for the people of Nagaland whose political and geographical location set them apart from the rest of the country.

Keywords: Belonging, Home, Kohima, Northeast, War

Introduction

Mari is a novel that revolves around the life of a young girl named Khrielievu Mari O'Leary. The story is an attempt to talk about the pain and suffering of the people in Nagaland who witnessed the devastation of Second World War and saw the greatest battle fought on their land. But unlike the representation of other riots and battles that were fought around India during the period of British colonialism, this battle has never received the attention of the mainstream historians and writers. The past of the Naga people somehow receded to their collective memory and oral stories. An attempt to voice these decisive events has never been reflected in their written literature. The literature of this region was largely oral in nature as Charles Chasie, president of Kohima educational society pointed out in an article named "The history of Nagaland reflected in its literature". He also explained the political pre-occupation of the Nagas for which literary activities continued to a 'suffer drought' for a long time in Nagaland. The oral history of her people, their experiences of colonialism, the war and the strange idea of independence realized by the people are some of the major themes in the early works of Easterine Kire. Her novel *A Naga Village Remembered*, published in 2003 is the first English fiction written by a Naga writer where she portrays the encounter of the Nagas with the British colonial force and their fierce resistance. In *Mari*, however the insightful writer tries to show the aftermath of that initial hostility. The narrative reflects the rhythmic nature of the Naga people, their daily lives, co-existence of different culture and an unwilling yet strong acceptance of the British forces before the 2nd world war which suddenly swept them all away turning their lives upside down. It was during this period of the war that the sense of belonging to a 'home' or 'homeland' became a serious issue in defining their identity and culture.

In an interview with Imwapangla Imsong Easterine Kire states, "when I was doing my masters in literature I was very inspired by the novels of African writers and felt that I could also write a novel about my culture and society the way they did" (171). It was this attempt to write

about her culture and the forgotten history of her people that she has started giving voice to the unheard battles and conflicts of Nagaland in her fictions. “The writer cannot expect to be excused from the task of re-education and regeneration that must be done”, says Chinua Achebe in his essay “The Novelist as Teacher” while discussing about the role of a writer in the post colonial process of producing counter narratives to the narrative of the empire (45). Collecting a vast range of oral narratives of her society Kire has assigned herself with this task of documenting the socio-political events of Nagaland that gave their people the specific space and identity. What she has done for Nagaland is similar to Salman Rushdie and Amitav Ghosh’s attempt to interrogate the colonial past and negotiating alternative ways of looking at history. However, Kire’s task is rendered complicated because of the geographic location of her homeland as well as the conflicts surrounding its politics.

Frantz Fanon rightly asserts that “the first step for ‘colonised’ people in finding a voice and identity is to reclaim their own past” (qtd. in Barry, 186). But the awakening of this consciousness to reclaim the past arose through a violent history of colonialism, direct contact with 2nd world war and the later strife of independence in Nagaland.

Easterine Kire’s *Mari* tries to rebuild the Kohima before, during and after the 2nd world war giving a clear idea of the need of reconstructing the idea of homeland through literature. The ‘urge to reclaim’ one’s past through creating fiction is what Salman Rushdie talks about in “Imaginary Homelands” (10). The picture of India that came alive in *Midnight’s Children* is a way of constructing or reclaiming ‘home’ as a diasporic writer. However, this returning home through fiction is not a nostalgia to dwell in the past rather it is “a useful tool” to evaluate and introspect the present (Rushdie 12).

Writing about the Naga people and construction their homeland forms a significant part in her novel *Mari*. But in “Remains of the Past: History, Diary, and Collective Memory of the Battle of Kohima, 1944”, K B VeioPou talks about the lack of sources that can give a good account of the

Naga people during and after the most important battle fought in its land. Stressing this argument she writes:

Books have been written on the historic war but they remain largely military accounts. Few of the well-known titles of the British reminiscence of the war include Robert Lyman's *Kohima 1944: The Battle that Saved India* (2010), John Colvin's *Not Ordinary Men: The Story of the Battle of Kohima* (1994), Leslie Edwards' *Kohima: The Furthest Battle* (2009), Arthur Swinson's *The Battle of Kohima* (1966), C.E. Lucas Philips' *Springboard to Victory* (1966), Fergal Keane's *Road of Bones: The Epic Siege of Kohima 1944* (2010), and General William Slim's own account published twelve years after the war as *Defeat to Victory* (1956). The Japanese reminiscences of the war can be found in Yukihiro Imai's *To and From Kohima* (1953), Tochiro Imanishi's *Burma Front Diary* (1961) and K. Tamayama and J. Nunneley's *Tales by Japanese Soldiers of the Burma Campaign 1942-1945* (2000).
(20)

VeioPou is right in pointing out the insufficient historical representation of the battle of kohima from an insider's point of view. It is in this context that Mari's narrative framed through diary entries during the wartime becomes important. Kire uses the collective memory of her people when she is writing about those incidents. Based on the real experiences of her aunt she is able to bring alive the Japanese invasion of India via the Naga Hills in 1944. It's a history of the Naga people, their pain and loss, the destruction of their home land which becomes the main focus of this narrative. Kire writes in the beginning of the novel about the source of her story

The pre-war town of Kohima has been recreated mostly through Mama's and Mari's eyes. They told me about landmark in the town such as the shops and the school and the hospital. They remembered the gallows used during British times to hang murderers, the pillory set upto deter wrongdoers from repeating their offence, the

names of their teachers and the number of cars in town. It was as though an entire lost era was slowly unfolding before my eyes. (viii)

In the novel, Kohima that existed before the war, the 'home', is created by the author through the diary that Mari finds "tucked away between shelves of old newspapers and magazines"(Kire.2). She clears the dust that covered the diary very much like Kire herself collects the fading memories of her people in an attempt to recall the past and create home. The actual house where Kire's mother and her aunt Mari grew up no longer stands as they lost it in a giant landslide in 1974. The loss is reflected in a poignant statement by Kire, "memories are all that remain" (ix). As Rushdie's India in *Midnight's Children* is a mental construction of home from the fractured memories, Kire's Nagaland is also born out of the oral narratives and fractured memories. "Home", as analyzed by John McLeod is "primarily a mental construct built from incomplete odds and ends of memory that survive from the past" (227). But Rushdie's idea of 'home' differs from Kire in various levels of representation. Unlike the other diasporic writers Kire problematizes the idea of home by her position as a regional writer. The socio political complications of the entire North East region of India are the decisive factors in defining the concept of 'home'. The experience of colonialism and freedom movements did not have a homogenous effect throughout India due to some political strategies of governance employed by the British. Specifically the cultural, ethnic and geographic diversity in the North East region, as Babyrani Yumnam points out in her essay "Partition and the Production of Marginal Spaces in India", have made it one of the most debated spaces on the country that challenges the concept of India as a "unified imaginary community" (167). These challenges to the national identity in the post colonial era are a byproduct of the British legacy.

From as early as 1919 the British administration has maintained a distance from the different tribes in the hills as they were declared "backward tract" thereby excluding these people from province of Assam and be administered by the Governor-in-council, as the agent of the Governor

General-in-council at the cost of centre revenue. India Act 1935 gave the British an advantage in later years when they used this provision to prevent, national political parties from extending their influence in this region. This also explains why the Naga Hills was completely cut off from the struggle for Indian independence. (Chaube, 72, Misra, 21). The British were successful in preventing the winds of national movement from reaching there and also nourishing the idea that once the British left India, the Nagas would be able to decide their own future. This also resulted in the Nagas not being psychologically prepared for the transition from British to Indian rule in 1947. (Misra, 2000)

This early political estrangement from India is one of the many reasons why Mari's narrative reflects a distance from engaging with the larger context of their experiences. The struggle to find a home and protect their land was an outcome of the direct contact with the 2nd world war which the other parts of the country did not witness directly. The displaced people, the inhabitants of Kohima and the other nearby places suffered an intense longing for home during the time of war. "When would the war end? When could we go home?" were the bitter questions that the characters stopped trying to answer (Kire 68). There are instances where the Naga people actively participated in helping the British soldiers to fight back the Japanese because they wanted the British to 'chase the Japanese out of our land' (Kire 84). The days of war strengthened the feeling of love for the motherland among the Nagas. In her diary entry of February 1946, Mari's narrative hints at the anticipation of the people regarding the independence that "India and Burma would become independent countries" (Kire 127). Interestingly Mari's next diary entry is dated in February 1950 which symbolically erases the significance of freedom from the history of Nagaland as the area did not realize freedom the way rest of the country did. Mari's diary on October 1956 talks about the ongoing political unrest in Nagaland and about those Naga people who were fighting for independence from India were killed by the 'Indian army' (Kire 143). Framed as a personal diary, omission of the detailed political events enables Kire to maintain a safe distance from the political

questions and debates. But the impact of insurgency can be felt in the personal lives of the characters as much as in the political sphere. The skillful use of the dates of the diary entries can also be read as Kire's attempt to politicize the land's history from the point of view of a native by throwing away the mainstream Indian history. The idea of a glorious aftermath of independence is challenged by her narrative that shows how the political condition of Nagaland was far from being peaceful. The family of Mari moves from Kohima to Assam in such situations of political unrest. The search for home, a place of safety and belongingness is a recurrent theme in the novel. MacLeod writes, "Home as an idea stands for shelter, stability, security and comfort" (210). Mari's realization of finding a home comes much later in the novel when she is able to feel that security among her people.

Reflecting on the newly built town of Kohima after the war she writes in her diary entry of February 1957, "there was freshness about the town and the small community of people. Everyone knew everyone else, which made it a warm and friendly place" (Kire148). It is a perfect environment where one can feel "at home" as it means "to occupy a location where we are welcome, where we can be with people very much like ourselves" (MacLeod, 210). It is after coming to that small fresh community of friends and family that Mari feels like 'coming home for the first time in a long, long time' (Kire 149). Mari who studies and works outside Nagaland for a large period of her life finds her sense of belonging in the nowhere but among her community and in their land. Her hesitation to part from her family after her lover Dickie proposes to take her to London is also her inability to imagine a life away from her homeland. This belongingness is represented in the decision Mari's mother makes to stay in Kohima during the time of war and later in the time of political unease after independence reflects the inextinguishable love for homeland that was born among the people of Nagaland. This character reminds us of Amitav Ghosh's *The Shadow Lines* where Jethamoshai says, "once you start moving, you never stop" (211). The idea of home realized by the people in India after the end of British rule is diverse. But the need to hold on the roots of

one's own home or homeland was stronger than ever. Much like him Mari's mother stayed in her home in Kohima facing all the troubles throughout her life. Because of the complex historical formation of the geographical spaces multiple layers of narrative about home or homeland have come about. While for Jethammoshai it was the ancestral home in Dhaka that meant safety and rootedness among the severe violence of partition, the home in Kohima meant safety to Mari's mother during the destruction of war. In the introduction to *Emerging Literatures From North East India* the editor Margaret Ch. Zama explains that these writings must be considered as

voices of Individual authors from societies caught in the cross current of their political and historical inheritances, personal tragedies and cultural ambivalence, voices that are involved in developing and contributing to a much larger consciousness that needs to be recognized and interrogated" (37).

These writings are not merely trying to go back to their turbulent past but in an absence of the authentic history of most of the north eastern communities the creative writers are trying to keep alive the oral history and search for their cultural roots, their home. In *Anthills of Savanna*, stressing on the importance of these narratives and their power Achebe writes

...it is only story that continue after war and warrior. It is the story that outlives the sound of war drums and exploits of brave fighters. It is the story, not the others that saves our people from our progeny from blundering like beggars into the spikes of the cactus fence... (124)

Influence of African writers in Kire's writing is seen in the way she uses her capacity to collect oral narratives of the war and produce it the written form as a tool to access their history and culture for the progeny. The culture of observing 'genna' days, their traditional belief about the hovering bee are some of the interesting factors that she weaves into her narrative which is similar to what Achebe does in a larger extent in his novels.

Conclusion

Easterine's Kire, as the forerunner of English fiction writer from Nagaland tries make her narrative a repository of the history and culture of her people and introduces the complicated issues surrounding their idea of belongingness. As a storyteller she is reconstructing and regenerating the knowledge of their culture and producing the idea of 'home' in all its complications.

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