

Art of Forgetting in Easterine Kire's *Mari*

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Abstract:

The paper focuses on the concepts – of the 'Art of Memory' (Remembrance), 'Forgiving and Forgetting, and 'Forgetting in reserve', which are considered to be the supportive concepts of the term 'Art of Forgetting'. Applying the concepts to the novel *Mari*, the paper is a study on the idea of 'forgetting' and 'remembering'. The term "Art of Forgetting" is commented on by critics like Halbwachs, Proust, Derrida, Weinrich, Ricoeur and others. The term occupies a comfortable position in the novel *Mari* written by the renowned Naga writer Easterine Kire Iralu.

Keywords: Art of Forgetting, Art of Memory, Forgiving and forgetting, Forgetting in reserve

Elie Wiesel, in his autobiography *All rivers run to the sea*, says,

Memory is a passion no less powerful than love. What does it mean to remember? It is to live in more than one world, to prevent the past from fading and to call upon the future to illuminate it. It is to revive fragments of existence, to rescue lost

beings, to cast harsh light on faces and events, to drive back the sands that cover the surface of things, to combat oblivion and to reject death. (Wiesel 150)

The Dutch cultural theorist Mieke Bal, calls memory “a travelling concept” (Memory 3). Pierre Nora along with Halbwachs defines memory as ‘embodied in living societies’, while history is the ‘reconstruction...of what is no longer’ (Memory 141). Memory and forgetting are interwoven. “Remembering is not the negative of forgetting. Remembering is a form of forgetting”, says Milan Kundera. Ricoeur says, “Forgetting...challenges the reliability of memory”. He also further defines memory “as a struggle against forgetting” (Vosloo 75). The concept of memory is discussed and emphasized right from the Platonic period. It is in the nineteenth century, with the ‘crisis of memory’ that the concept of ‘forgetting’ attained its significance.

The novel *Mari* is a kind of forgotten fragment of the past, inscribed in the narrative present in a ‘form of working through’. It is a positive claim towards the art of forgetting. The novel presents the ‘art of living’ quite beautifully. Kire says of the tradition, culture and literature of her people with oral dying out, it’s all going to be lost. The novel is set in a form of a diary. The central character Khrielievu Mari O’ Leary, is Kire’s own aunt. It could also be called semi-autobiographical fiction. The diary-set novel parallels two stories at the time. One is the battle of Kohima, caused by the Japanese invasion of India in 1944 through the Naga hills. The other is the life of Nagas during the war, which is narrated through the story of the love and life of her aunt Mari. On the whole, the novel is a memorable write-up of a love story of a young girl, whose life becomes a challenge due to war. The young girl Mari, even after repeated failures, reshapes and rebuilds her life so securely.

When talking about the ability of memory, Augustine says, “The huge repository of the memory, with its secret and unimaginable caverns, welcomes and keeps all these things, to be recalled and brought out for use when needed” (Vosloo 73). Pierre Nora talks of true memory and modern memory. The true memory, he associates with the body which comprises habits, traditions and so on. Modern memory, in contrast, which is transformed by its passage through history, is associated with writing. It is the memory of the ‘archive’ and relies on the “visibility of the image” (Memory 142).

Mari is a true narrative of a history cum personal life as recalled by Kire's Aunt Mari. The literal terms, Memory and forgetting find their way rather comfortably into the purpose and narrative of the novel. Mari, Kire's aunt is a survivor of the war. She is the victim of the war too. Her life has become a challenge because of war. She was a seventeen-year-old young girl, during the Japanese invasion. Mari O'Leary's memory is recorded with matters and events of the war, which includes her personal life. She opens her memory to her niece Easterine Kire. The recorded events in Kire's memory are chiseled out into a beautiful novel. Kire says in her note to the novel,

I started writing *Mari* when I was about sixteen. I wrote it in my head during my 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. I finally wrote it in 2003, with the help of Mari and a diary she had kept during the war years (*Mari* vii).

Though the book could not be given the position of an autobiography or a historical fact book, it is a true narration of a recorded historical memory of wartime. Or to put it in the words of Neeraj Sankyan and Suman Sigroha, it is a "discourse of reconstructing a history long neglected and on the verge of being forgotten" (Sankyan 113). The art of memory (remembering) served its purpose in producing the novel. Reverend C. R. kotze, a 'liberation volk-theologian, in one of his sermons, makes his plea for memory as, "...because we want to look forward, we ought to look back!. The highest building must have its foundations. The tree cannot live without its roots. The nation cannot exist without its history... If you want to go forward in a healthy and strong way, then you must look back into history". (Vosloo 79)

Mari is a war book through the eyes of the commoners ie the Nagas, and the natives of the land. Kire says, "*Mari* is not just Mari's story. It is the story of Kohima and its people". Kire says in the prologue to the novel, "The memories of loss are the ones that searingly remain".

Unlike a historical war book, critically, the novel *Mari*, records the destruction and reconstruction of the lives of the Naga people elaborately and clearly. The battle of Kohima is the war between the British and the Japanese. It was claimed as the first

British victory over the Japanese. However, there was a group of hidden warriors behind the war, who were the Nagas, the common people of the hills. The war was not the war of the Nagas, but it was a war in their land. The Nagas supported the British soldiers by all means, throughout the battle. Jonathan Glancey in his "A Journey to India's forgotten frontier" says, "the British undoubtedly changed the Nagas, or at least the Naga way of life in a large part of the hills ... under colonial administration, providing roads and a railhead" (119). This might be the reason for the Nagas to support the British. Anyhow, a number of Nagas lost their lives as that of the British soldiers. The life of the Nagas totally shattered and they rebuilt their lives after the war. This had become a hidden history. Kire calls it "the forgotten battle" and its veterans the "forgotten heroes" (Mari x). The author takes writing or narration as a tool to retell the hidden history of the Nagas, in the pre and post-war periods.

Is forgetting a boon or bane? Nietzsche says, "Forgetting is essential to the action of any kind, just as not only light but also darkness too, is essential for the life of anything organic" (vosloo 76). He further says it is possible to live almost without memory...but that it is impossible to live without forgetting. Vosloo further puts it that there is some grace in forgetting and in turn, it is also desirable. War is a painful memory. It brings changes. War takes lives. War gives life. Every war had made an accountable change in history. The society before the war and the society after the war could be highly distinguished. The battle of Kohima is not an exception. Kire says, "It altered our lives completely ... what is so remarkable... is that people have very little memory of what they were doing before the war years... I was left with the impression that the war, ... was almost equivalent to the big bang, the beginning of all life" (Mari viii).

Mari is the exposure of the pre-war town of Kohima and the post-war town of Kohima recreated through the eyes of Aunt Mari. The narration proves that the post-war Kohima had an upliftment, which was possible only by getting rid of the traumatic memories of the past, "There were just too many losses" (92) and "People observed long months of mourning for their dead but got on with the business of life determinedly...After a great calamity, our people always tried their best to keep their spirits up. This was the way of our people" (107, 108).

Life is a challenge. It is a good struggle. It has ups and downs, odds and ends, of which one is not aware. Life is abstract. The one who structures, plasters, moulds and mends, attains the concrete version of it. It is a quite tough part. Still, memory could make it with a little consideration. Aunt Mari does it perfectly. She at the age of eighteen, is left with her future at stake. She was engaged to a soldier named Victor, who gets killed at war. Subsequently, she finds herself pregnant. She wishes to die as her fiancé is no more and to live for her baby. She herself is young, and she is under the guidance of her parents. Life turns coarse and rough for her in no time.

A heavily injured mind actually seeks immediate relief. Wishing it to be a perfect choice, the mind pushes itself to it. To her dismay, the greater belief and trust in life results in greater damage. Mari's husband-to-be, Vic is dead. She and her girl child are left in the possession of her parents. She makes another attempt to construct her future. She gets in relation with another soldier named Dickie. This again proves a failure. Now, she is a forsaken mother with two children from two different fathers.

Right decisions come from experience after experience. The instinct never turns right always. There might be negative situations. There might be failures and at times a heavy blow. The formative is to push off and choose an alternative. Mari, still is in her teens or early twenties, and she is already a mother of two fatherless children. The first could be out of innocence but the second is an attempt. She wants to survive. She shakes off her memory of the immediate past and rolls on deep into her instinct. She pushes off the experience of the overwhelming and crushing burden of the past. She becomes a nurse. The earnings help her to bring up her children. She also makes her life brighter aftermath. Aunt Mari's the woven future is the result of what Nietzsche calls the 'lightness' of forgetting.

To forgive is a kind of another art. Hancock says, "While we are custodians of our memories, we neither choose nor own them, but rather they own or choose us, making us who we are" (Hancock 4). The art of forgetting gets fulfilled when the art of forgiving is enforced. To put it in a simple way, if person A teases person B, and if person B tries to forget the incident (the act of teasing), he should forgive person A. If he is not forgiving person A, he could not forget the incident. The incident crosses his memory,

whenever he meets or remembers person A. On the contrary, if person B forgives person A, the incident is diminished in the memory. This is the art of forgiving and the art of forgetting. The Lord God, says in the Bible, "For I will forgive their wickedness and will remember their sins no more" (Jeremiah 31:34).

"The duty to remember is a duty to teach, whereas the duty to forget is the duty to go beyond anger and hatred", says Kearney and Dooley (Vosloo 81). Kire shows Kohima and her people after the war. The war-torn Kohima is reconstructed, after the reminiscence of war getting diminished. "Life had slowly returned to normal for everyone else... with the declaration that the war was over in our hills, the work of reconstruction began" (*Mari* 104). She elaborately discusses the changes that happens in Kohima village, after the war. The thatched houses are replaced with "corrugated iron roofing. The tiny paths between the clans are now replaced with circular roads. Some of the Marwari shops are handed over to the Angami Nagas. The Mission schools are now upgraded to high schools.

Aunt Mari says she has no clear memory of her moments with Vic. But the loss, the moments of his death, have left a good memory in her. The loss and the pains are the ones which are left uneffaced in the memory for a long time. To erase it, the art of forgiving is needed. Mari did make her future bright, for she did forgive and forget. She did forgive war, which made her, in turn to, forget Vic. Thanks to the war, for it, had taught her a lesson in life, "I couldn't help but feel that I had been completely transformed by the war" (113). She did forgive Dickie, and forget the bitter experience she had with him, "I think my love for Dickie was tinged with hope. It was like turning away from the sad abyss that was the past to embrace a sweeter future" (124). She was able to forget the painful memories of her past. She experienced a "renewed hope" after the war. She becomes Mari O'Leary and has had a happy married life for about 42 years.

Ricoeur says, "this is a forgiveness which disregards the original act rather than erasing it entirely". Vosloo, in his paper "On historical injustice and the art of forgetting", says, "The language of 'forgetting' cannot be used as an alibi to forget or erase the past, since the past remains in the present; it can only be used and claimed with the healing motive of lifting the weight or burden of the past" (81). No doubt, the scar of

the painful memories would remain still. The book *Mari* is itself the inscription of the scar, left over in the memory of Mari O'Leary. At the same time, the book is a perfect assimilation of Kire, to keep her people alive in the heart of the world. The personal past and the historical past still remain in the heart and memory of Aunt Mari. Derrida also commented on the concept 'Art of Forgetting' and differs in some perspectives of Ricoeur, but both struggle with the distinction between "forgetting without amnesia" and "forgiving without erasing memory" (Memory 156).

Mari is a writing that emerged from contexts permeated by memories of historical injustice and more specifically the duty to remember and the implied need to fight against forgetting. Nietzsche in one of his essays says if health and happiness are to be attained "the unhistorical and the historical are necessary for equal measure for the health of an individual, of a people and a culture" (63). The contradictory and perhaps the irony here is what Derrida calls "the life of forgetting" (Cassigneul 6). Easterine Kire Iralu's notion in producing *Mari* is to make it visible to the world the forgotten past of her people, the Nagas and her village, whose contribution was at the stake of forgetting. The art or life of 'forgetting' is a blessing which thrusts toward a new beginning.

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