

# **Kire's *Mari*: An Autobiographical Memory Narrative**

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## **Abstract**

Autobiographical memory is a memory related to the self. It is a coherent account of the psychological history of oneself. It includes personal memory, autobiographical facts, generic personal memory and the self-schema. Easterine Kire's *Mari* is a telling of the past life of the character Mari in a first-person narrative. Mari happened to live in the pre and post war period of the battle of Kohima - 1944. She was a survivor of war, too. The personal experience of Mari, coherently linked with social, cultural and political disturbances of the state of Nagaland, especially Kohima town, is narrated in the novel. The purpose of the paper is to analyse how far the book satisfies itself as an 'autobiographical memory narrative' by giving a close reading and understanding of the narration.

**Keywords:** Autobiographical memory, socio-political context, global worldview, local social interaction, subjective lens.

Easterine Kire's novel *Mari* is a record of past events in the life of her maternal aunt Mari. The events cover the immediate pre and post-war period of the battle of Kohima, which lasted for three months from 4 Apr 1944 to 22 Jun 1944. The narration starts in Feb 1943, when Mari was seventeen years old. It is an "auto-diegetic" (Devi, 36) narrative, where the narrator itself is the protagonist. The novel is set in the form of a diary and is given a "historico-biographical" approach (Devi, 35). Kire had educated the

**Kire's Mari: An Autobiographical Memory Narrative**  
**- January - March 2024**

readers - the impact of war on her people, the Angami Nagas, through the novel. The novel proves to be a "hetero-emotive site" (Devi, 34) that commemorates and evokes memories of the tumultuous yet exciting times. It belongs to the genre of "life writing" (Devi, 34). "Life writing" is a purposeful recording of personal memories and experiences, opinions and emotions for different ends. Kire had picturised Mari's wartime experience and the Kohima of yesteryear, which had vanished long before in history, in the novel.

Sarkar, in his article "Memory Novels as Lieux De Mémoire: Reading Cultural Memory In Easterine Kire's *Mari* And *A Respectable Woman* refers to Kire's *Mari* as "sites of memory" (16). Pou, in his article "Remains of the Past: History, Diary, and Collective Memory of the Battle of Kohima, 1944", calls the novel a "political memory of nation" (26). Devi, as mentioned above, recognises the novel as "historico-biographical" (35) approach. The paper had taken its lead from the above authors, who had kept the novel in the criterion of memory-based narratives.

The positive facet of memory is retention. Autobiographical memory is a retention of collective personal experiences, events, emotions and information that an individual has acquired in his/her lifetime. It holds knowledge about the self and personal events. It is a complex mental representation of the self in the past. Moreover, it performs a self-representative function by using personal memories to create and maintain a coherent self-identity over time. It is one of the key sources of identity and provides a crucial psychological link from the personal history of the self to the selves embedded in society. In short, it is a memory of one's personal history.

The structure of autobiographical memory reflects many hierarchical layers of extended events that are nested within one another and adhere to the same theme.

Autobiographical memories are most commonly organised into episodic memory and semantic memory. Episodic memory is a component where the events or personal experiences are remembered as episodes. These memories include time, place and emotions related to the event. It is a memory that includes specific events in one's life, like 'tasting hot and spicy noodles in the rain, on a drive, in Munnar'. Semantic memory is a component where the common knowledge of facts, ideas and information related to one's own identity, personal traits and beliefs are stored. It is a knowledge of fact that

## **Kire's Mari: An Autobiographical Memory Narrative** **- January - March 2024**

one has acquired through learning and experiences. It is knowing, for instance, 'Abdul Kalam died when my son was two years old'. Episodic memories and semantic memories are together called explicit memory.

Autobiographical knowledge is, therefore, a component which represents the overarching narrative of the self and concept that one constructs based on his/her own experiences. It contains one's understanding of his/her life story, the continuation of self over time and the significant life events that had shaped one's life. The above three components work together to form a coherent autobiographical memory with the influence of one's perception of the past, present and future.

The process or the functioning of the human brain on understanding Autobiographical memory is defined by Robyn Fivush, in her chapter 'Autobiographical memory' as "to place individual memory in a larger social and cultural context, examining how global cultural worldviews and local social interactions both reflect and shape individual memory" (13). She further explains in "Autobiographical Memory". *Learning and Memory: A Comprehensive Reference*: "Autobiographical memory is a complex blend of memories of single, recurring, and extended events integrated into a coherent story of self that is created and evaluated through sociocultural practices" (1). The paper is to analyse the novel *Mari* in consideration of Robyn Fivush's definition of autobiographical memory.

*Mari* is a narration of the pure personal experience of Mari. The book begins with the life history of Mari, a seventeen-year-old girl and prolongs her old age. It is structured as that of a diary or episodes. The novel presents the personal experience of Mari throughout and aftermath of the war. Through the personal experience of Mari, the trauma and collective sufferings of the Naga people, in general, are communicated. The narration explicitly shows the way the war had altered the life of Mari, in particular, and that of Nagas, in general. Thus, the novel parallels the individual's experience in a socio-political context.

A community is a system formed by individuals who share common cultural and traditional social aspects and live in one geographical place. Society is a group of people, who are expected to share a common custom and law. Every individual forms the basic component of either a community or a society. Therefore, any cultural, political or

**Kire's Mari: An Autobiographical Memory Narrative**  
**- January - March 2024**

sociological changes that fall on a community or a society bring a vibrant change in the lives of the individuals living in the particular community or society. Those "people whose history and civilisation had been pushed into the margins took up the task of recreating their past...as part of the nationalist agenda of identity assertion", says Preeti Gill (Narratives of lived experience – writing the Northeast).

Mari, Kire's aunt, is an ordinary Angami Naga woman who happens to be born, loved, and lived throughout and after the war. Taking Aunt Mari's memories and her diary as a source, Kire tries to explain the social, cultural and political disaster that had fallen on her community because of the war. The book starts with Mari as a teenage girl rather than to begin with her birth. She says the Kohima town was shattered. The houses and the lifestyle of the Naga people were completely shaken. The people had a nomadic turn, left with no shelter and food. Basic essentialities were denied. Kire had consciously picked her aunt's experience to explain the consequences of the war on her people. The author had placed an individual's memory (Mari's memory) in a larger social context (the war of Kohima) in the book.

The novel further picturises the destruction of Kohima town during the war and the reconstruction of Kohima town after the war. Life during the war is juxtaposed with the pre and post-war period of Kohima town and the Angami Nagas. The battle of Kohima was a decisive battle that ended the Japanese invasion of India during World War II. The battle is also called the 'Battle of the Tennis Court' and the 'Stalingrad of the East'. It was one of the fiercest battles to be fought during World War II. The battle, as remembered in history, was a war waged between British and Indian troops against the Japanese invasion of India in 1944. Optimistically, the war – 'the war of Kohima and Imphal', had been called the "Britain's greatest battle". In 2013, the British National-Army-museum voted the Battle of Imphal and Kohima to be 'Britain's Greatest Battle'. This forms the global worldview of the battle of Kohima.

Kire narrates the experience of war purely from a Naga perspective. Kire explains the other side of the war and tries to make the world understand the war "through a subjective lens" (Fivush, 14). It could be justified by the fact that 'it is their land'. The war was between the British – Indian troops and the Japanese in the Kohima town, which happened to be the land of the Nagas. The outnumbered allied soldiers were helped by

**Kire's Mari: An Autobiographical Memory Narrative**  
**- January - March 2024**

the Naga villagers, who acted as scouts and ammunition carriers. Shiva Prasad Sharma shares Dovey's words as "a home is a relationship that inhabitants share with the outer world or environment. It is an emotional relationship between the dwellers and the dwelling place (5375). The statement "war altered the lives of Naga completely" (Kire, viii) proves to be a subjective approach. The term 'alter' does not take a negative turn only. The war had left great memories. The memories were neither gloomy nor blissful. They were a blend of emotions. The war took out lives, burnt out shelters, damaged their identity, etc, but replaced something new – in Mari's life and also in the community. Here, the book becomes a "site for the individual and cultural construction of truth" (Fivush, 14).

For Mari and the others of her generation, World War II and the Japanese invasion of their lands was the most momentous period of their lives. Everything happened at the same time. Growing up, falling in love, war, homelessness, starvation, death, partying and, finally, peace, people have very little memory of what they were doing before the war years. I was left with the impression that the war, for us, was almost equivalent to the Big Bang, the beginning of all life. (Kire, viii)

Kire, the memory exhibit, she had made in the book is quite a firsthand experience. She is the immediate next generation of war. The memories of war shared by her aunt, her mother, and the villagers turned out to be quite personally experienced stories. Hence, the memory she had attained and shared "provides a more ... nuanced understanding, as a product of both individual and cultural construction" (Fivush, 13).

As already discussed above, Kire wants to let the world know that her people, Nagas, especially Angami Nagas, were the ones who were affected bitterly by the war. Here are some living statements to show the worthiness of Kire's proclamation in the book.

Kuozeu Vizo, a 98-year-old Angami Naga woman, says the sight of her village bombed and burned black was as spellbinding as a golden rice field ripe for harvest. "I still wonder how they even knew which land belonged to whom when they started rebuilding the village" (India Times).

**Kire's *Mari*: An Autobiographical Memory Narrative**  
**- January - March 2024**

Khriepira-U Rutsa, an 85-year-old Angami Naga woman, smiles as she speaks about her experiences as a young girl during the 1944 battle between the Japanese and British Commonwealth forces in her village. "One night, a group of Japanese came home and ate all our chicken. They would roast the chicken over the fire and devour it" (India Times).

The memory of the political experience of the past is still haunting and hurting the minds of the people because the agony of the suffering reached its zenith during those days (Devi, 917). To put it in the words of Sharnappa, "It is a compelling saga of trauma, self-identity and strategies of survival" (71). Memory played a vital role in socialising the events of war and life in the Kohima hill town. *Mari* is truly a product of memory that produces the reader's collective information of the facts and impacts of war in a particular society.

"The story of these people is the story of history's accidents (Kalita, 17). The battle of Kohima is a battle known globally. It is a pity that India seems to have forgotten one of the fiercest battles of the Second World War. The book is an outcome of firsthand knowledge and experience of memory shared with Kire. She has elicited the memory that had been shared with her and has further transformed those memories to meet the social need.

Unlike a historian, who poses objective and scientific claims of historical truth, Kire, as a literary artist, blurs the disciplinary boundaries between fact and fiction, memory and history, to forge an inclusive archive of the Naga memory novels are the source of historical knowledge production where the memories of ordinary people have been documented to write "alternate history". (Sarkar, 17)

Thus, the novel communicates events of the war through the memory of Aunt Mari, who echoes the pain, self-imprisonment, and silenced voices of Nagas during the war. This proves that the novel itself is an autobiographical memory narrative.

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**Kire's Mari: An Autobiographical Memory Narrative**  
**- January - March 2024**

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