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Acts of Remembrance: Memories of the 'Forgotten Battle' in India's Northeast

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Abstract:

The Second World War is an important historical reference point for people's multiple groups in the Northeast of India. For the Nagas, it was a great awakening because one of the 'fiercest' and 'decisive' battles was fought in their homeland, though the war was not theirs. Many books have been written on the impact of the war but considerably as perspectives from military accounts penned by war veterans. Recently, the emergence of some interesting written works of literature has provided 'insider' perspectives on how ordinary citizens saw the large-scale war. This paper proposes to critically examine some of these works, both fictional and non-fictional accounts. But for the sake of space, it would be limited to the Naga experiences of the Second World War: the Battle of Kohima. Borrowing Jay Winter's idea of how women and laymen have emerged as active participants in reading historical events, this paper argues that witnesses' accounts of the historical past as a genre hold immense importance in the re-imagination of the event, and how they impact individuals and the community at large.

Keywords: **Remembrance, Memory, Battle of Kohima, Easterine Kire, Nagas, Witness accounts.**

Introduction: Remembering the 'Forgotten Battle'

In his seminal work *Remembering War: The Great War Between Memory and History in the Twentieth Century*, Jay Winter talks of the "memory boom" of the twentieth century, with a primary focus on the First World War, and probes the linkages of history and memory: "In virtually all acts of remembrance, history, and memory are braided together in the public domain, jointly informing our shifting and contested understanding of the past" (2006, 6). While for the study of history and memory, 'professionals' are authorized with the task (more so in the former), Winter laid focus on the civilians and victims as witnesses because "many laymen and women who engage in acts of remembrance read history and care about it" (5).

Borrowing Winter's idea, this paper proposes to discuss the impact of the Second World War in the context of India's Northeast, with a particular reference to the Nagas. Much has been said and written about the war, precisely as a human catastrophe that has changed the course of history. But nothing quite substantial is mentioned about the Battle of Kohima – often referred to as the "forgotten battle" in the war memorial inscription, or the "Stalingrad of the East"; and its fallen veterans, "the forgotten army" (*Mari* 12). However, the war forms an important historical reference point through the oral narratives of many people groups in the region. For the Nagas then, it was a rude awakening in many senses because one of the 'fiercest' and most 'decisive' battles was fought in their homeland. Perhaps, the Battle of Kohima remains a "historical moment, a turning point" for the Nagas, and thus a "*lieux de memoire*, sites of memory", borrowing the words of the French philosopher Pierre Nora (1989, 7).

Although the Battle of Kohima took place for a brief period (4 April to 22 June 1944), the decisiveness of the battle led the military historian Robert Lyman to assert that it was "[t]he most desperate and bloody struggle in the entire war on the south Asian land mass" (2011, 215). Visiting the ravaged town after the war, the last Viceroy of India, Lord Louis Mountbatten, commented, "The Battle of Kohima will probably go down as one of the greatest battles in history" (Kolakowski 2019, 7). True to the prediction, in April 2013, the Battle of Kohima was named Britain's greatest battle (*Reuters*). As per the historical narratives, after having overrun Burma (Myanmar) in 1942, the Japanese had made plans to advance into India. Being the seat of the Deputy Commissioner of the Naga Hills and the principal town lying between the Brahmaputra Valley and the Imphal Valley, the Japanese needed to siege Kohima if they wanted to advance onwards. While many

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military accounts have surfaced telling their rights as historical accounts, how the native population saw and experienced the war is not heard of.

Lately, narratives of how the Nagas experienced the war have emerged, drawing fresh interest. Charles Chasie and Harry Fecitt's *The Road to Kohima: The Naga Experience in the 2nd World War* (henceforth *The Road to Kohima*) reads as an attempt at "covering the full spectrum of Naga experiences of the 2nd World War and the Battle of Kohima", which, the authors hoped, would "help to shed a little more light on how Naga society has been profoundly affected by this War" (2017, 19-20). Before the publication of this book, another book titled *The Battle of Kohima* (2007) by Mekhrie Khate, Aphriilie Iralu, et al. brought together several narratives of people from different Naga villages, wherein they recounted their experiences as veterans and witnesses of the war. Easterine Kire has enlivened the war in the literary world by re-imagining it through her fiction like *Mari* (2010) and *A Respectable Woman* (2019, henceforth *ARW*). This paper proposes to examine some of these narratives in light of new interests in the Northeast region. As insiders' account, these narratives, though seemingly from the 'margins', are significantly integral to memory-making in the larger historical construct of the past. In the Naga imagination, the Second World War demarcates a clear historical timeline – "before the war" and "after the war". In many people's vocabularies, it is called the Great War (Kire 2010; Chasie & Fecitt 2017). Though Nagas have memories of the First World War (since numerous Nagas were recruited in the colonial labor force to fight in France), it was a distant story, narrated by only those who experienced the war. But the Second World War was a real eye-opener to a large-scale war fought on their land to which they bore witness to the massive devastation and havoc it brought about. Another book that came to light is *World War II in Northeast India: A Study of Imphal and Kohima Battles* (2019) by Khrienuo Ltu which proposed to cover the "social aspects of the two battles" in addition to the already available "military perspectives" (10).

Women as Witnesses: Easterine Kire's *Mari* and *A Respectable Woman*

While in the past, narratives on the Battle of Kohima have predominantly been seen through the lens of military historiography, as the war veterans constructed memories of it, now newer 'actors' have emerged on the scene. In particular, stories are told not by those who waged the war full throttle with their weapons or official historians, but by the women 'witnesses' whose

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memories help reconstruct not just the actions of the war but also the historicity of the place and people. This is an important aspect of seeing the war afresh because it affects all, soldiers and civilians alike. Unlike in many instances where men hold sway over information about the history of the community, Winter argues that "[w]omen are now at the heart of acts of remembrance because war has moved out of the battlefield and into every corner of civilian life… That is why women as well as men now construct the story, disseminate it, and consume it. Women join men in forming a new class of historical actors…" (2006, 6-7).

In *History, Memory, and the Genre of Testimony,* citing Saul Friedländer, Aleida Assmann writes on memories "to be an indispensable and integral part of historical discourse" as they necessitate to " help bridge the gap between the abstract academic account" and "the intensely painful and fragmented personal experience" (262), in that it renders distinction as well as clearer understanding between ''factual history'' and ''remembered past'' (qtd. Friedländer in Assmann 263). The presence of the British in the Naga Hills from 1832 to 1947, the Japanese invasion of the Naga land more than a century later (1944), and the inevitable full-blown battle between the Allied forces and the Japanese forces, have made the insider's witness/testimony account significantly diverged into two directions but paradoxically representing the two sides of the same coin: the memorialization works as "complementary modes of reconstructing and relating to the past" (Assmann 263), while it also simultaneously provides the authentic account of the Naga's experiences of the war since it has not been highlighted much in the militarized historical narrative viz-a-viz the government-funded official records of the Battle of Kohima. In tandem with Winter's observation on the inclusivity of the civilians/insiders' role as the 'memory-keepers' in what is to become an integral part of the memory function, the female narrators' acts of remembering "...is less to tell us what happened than what it felt like to be in the center of those events" (Assman 262). This is an important insight, given the poignancy of the Nagas' growing exigency at the time when the Second World War reached the land since the "Naga freedom struggle that followed upon the heels of the war, [has] cast a dark shadow over our land" (11) as Kire informs us in her author's note in *Mari*. It entails a complex matrix yet immensely crucial documents in the reconstruction of remembering the past.

The accounts of the war survivors, Mari and Khonou, are strategically mapped at the center of the narration. This asserts their stakeholdership by voicing their first-hand war experiences in

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grappling with the untold sufferings, miseries, displacement, deaths, and trauma wrought by the warring forces. Kire's position as a third-generation informed woman writer adds a unique vantage point: an insider Naga female perspective. Her position as the Naga writer (aptly called the 'keeper' of the Naga stories) privileges her to weave true stories based on several interviews and conversations with Naga individuals from the war generation or the post-war Kohima reconstruction era for the plot constructions of *Mari* and *ARW*. *Mari* is a semi-fictional narrative based on Mari or Khrielieviü Mari O'Leary's diary, written from 1943 to 1998. Kire has also painstakingly taken "...several interviews and long distance phone calls to get the missing details from both Mama and Mari, the two sisters left of the four siblings" (9). Her accessibility to the repository of memories of her maternal aunt, Mari, and her mother, and also the older generation, grants her a writer's ethical positioning in authenticating the 'remembering' processes as true accounts of recollections, bearing in mind how the Second World War has "...altered [the narrators'] lives completely" (10). For instance, Kire writes:

For Mari and the others of her generation, the Second World War and the Japanese invasion of our lands was the most momentous period of their lives. Everything happened at the same time. Growing up, falling in love, war, homelessness, starvation, death, parting, and finally peace (9-10).

The overarching themes of war, destruction, displacement, and the brutal transformation of the Naga people and their homeland festered by the Battle of Kohima extends to the post-war era novel *ARW,* which narrates the story of the protagonist's mother, Khonuo. However, her act of remembrance is both personal and collective as Kohnou uses the first-person plural pronoun 'we' to deliver her testimony. *ARW* lucidly underlines the compelling conviction to 'tell' the present generation lest the memory is lost. As history and memory interface/interact in the narrative, Khonou takes the protagonist back to the historical moment of the Battle of Kohima, the destruction of the Angami lands, and the present post-war-era Kohima. Kohima, in her re-imagination, is still the same and yet has transformed because of the war. In the present milieu of post-war Kohima with different realities and new challenges, the information absorbed by the protagonist from her mother's stories plays a focal point in enriching her perspective about the legacy of her parents, her land, and the Angami Nagas, and how her personal history is entwined with all three. This interconnectivity foregrounds the pastness in the present and the presentness

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in the past, the continuum that places importance on the insiders' perspectives in the understanding of Naga history. Because the insider's memory and the official history co-exist or appear simultaneously, the memorial epitaph of the Kohima war cemetery is a palimpsest of sorts: "When you go home/ tell them of us/ and say for your tomorrow/ we gave our today". In that, Mari's tragic personal loss (the death of Victor, her fiancé) and the collective traumatic experiences coincide with Kohima's precarious position in being targeted as the epicenter of the war, along with the harrowing experiences of the Allied forces during the bloody war with Japanese forces. While the semblance of solemn respect, awe, and "bringing tears to visitors' eyes" (*Mari* 15), the epitaph continues to render such emotional responses, the insiders' recalling of the unforgettable war produces an undercurrent narrative that deems an equal validation. Mapping these multiple records insists on a new contextual meaning-making of the epitaph.

Thus, Mari and Khonou's account of memory narratives "appeals to us partly because it projects an immediacy we feel has been lost from history" to borrow Kerwin Lee Klein's words (129). In *Mari,* her dramatic transformation from a young, innocent girl of seventeen to a grown woman within a tumultuous short span (4 April to 22 June 1944) changes her entirely and her view on relationships, life, communal identity, and sense of self develops new perspectives, understandably colored by sorrow and tinge of bitterness. The significant period of Mari's younger days in falling in love for the first time in wartime with a Royal Engineer, Staff Sergeant Victor, or 'Vic' runs an identical narrative in the story of another main character: the young Kohima in her full bloom. The now wiser and older Mari reminiscences:

At those times, we forgot about the war. It was wonderful to be young and in love, and no fear of losing our near and dear ones. How young we were then. How thoughtless of what the future could bring…Happy times leave no scars. The memories of loss are the ones that searingly remain…That happy life seemed to have passed in a flash and now everything was being threatened by war. (50, 65)

Kohima, too, falls victim to the terrible fury of war, as Mari painfully recalls, "How shocked we were to see the whole of Kohima ablaze and covered with thick, black smoke" (73). This historical moment brings an ironic twist when, a month ago (March 1943), the Angami Nagas provided food and shelter to the Burmese refugees displaced from their homeland on account of

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the Japanese invasion. The sights of hunger, diseases, and death for many Nagas made the bitter realization of "what war could do to humanity" (35). Today, quite unbeknown to the present generation, Dimapur has borne witness to the horror of the migrant Burmese who also became the victims of the war. Mari tells us that on reaching Dimapur, the Burmese refugees settled in a camp, and "the British government provided them with food and shelter" (35). The camp is popularly known as the 'Burma Camp' and retains its name to date. But by April 1943, the Nagas were faced with the same fate: mass displacement, homelessness, starvation, fear, and running for shelter. As the Japanese forces reached Naga land, people escaped to " the Angami villages in the north, to Chieswema, Rükhroma, and other northern villages where they could live in relative safety" (62). In the Naga cultural context, leaving one's ancestral home displays non-allegiance to the family name and tribal legacy. The emotional and sociological impact of dislocation from their home, and being subjected to an irresolute state, the Angami Nagas experienced alienation and insecurity in one's land. The helplessness of separation from family members or those left behind had cut a permanent psychological mark, a deep-seated trauma that was intensely real at the ground level. This traumatic memory made Mari reflect, "Human life seemed to be so valueless in the face of war…We had seen so much in so little time" (101). The horrific witness of decaying (unburied) dead bodies of the soldiers of both forces, the bombardment of grenades, bombshells, and air attacks that led to massive destruction of the land, made Kohima and her surrounding areas beyond recognition.

At the military level, the increasing movements and activities of the army convoys from different nationalities: the Pathans and Sikhs, the British, the Indian and the Gurkha forces, and others, stationed at Dimapur, Zubza, Kohima, and en route to Manipur, confirmed the certainty of the threat of Japanese invasion that created a heightened fear, anxiety, confusion and paralysis all in one on the civilians caught in between the two opposing forces. Mari recalls: "By the end of March [1944], Kohima was like a ghost town… Long gone were the open markets and hawkers that used to add so much color to the town…"(62). For Mari and her people, the pre-war period, chronicled from February 1943 to March 1944, will be remembered as the best years of tranquility and happy life. In the Naga context, the shock experience has led to a three-fold realization: the perceived idea that the British and the Allied forces as invincible is threatened by the Japanese might; the possibility of losing one's homeland to the Japanese invader; and the end of a happy,

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secure life. What transpires through this narrative is that the Nagas are the victims of circumstances of war. For the indigenous Nagas, land holds a sacred value that attests to one's history, culture, tradition, and identity. Kire reminds us of the arrival of the British in Naga Hills in 1832 and the series of combats against the "rebel villages" to subjugate the latter into submission to British rule, the last of which was the battle of Khonoma in 1879: "This battle ended with the enactment of a treaty between the two forces" (*ARW* 178). But a century later, the British and the Nagas have become allies to defend and preserve Kohima and the neighboring places. However, what began as a fascination/romanticization of the notion of heroism (for instance, the war artillery, the Dakota warplanes, and men in uniform), soon lost its charm as the uncertainty and gloom occupied the people's minds. But desperate times called for desperate measures in which young Naga boys and men volunteered to work as spies and guides (given the difficult terrain of Kohima and the neighboring areas). The women volunteered to be nurses to tend to the wounded soldiers.

It is not only Mari but Kounou too, who continued to carry the psychological scar of the ravaging war as the protagonist of *ARW* tells us, " It took my mother, Khunuo, exactly forty-five years before she could bring herself to talk about the war. She was ten years old when the Japanese invaded our hills in 1944" (3). For Khonou, remembering 1944 is only done in a " fragmented manner, and her stories were narrated without a beginning, a middle, and an end. You would just have to be around at the right moment to catch the story as it appeared, dredged up from her memory bank…" (8). Giving access to her "memory bank", to 'tell', therefore, is to make her memory of the past an authentic document of the 'untold true stories' of people like her. In the memory of a ten-year-old girl, war triggers her death, suffering, hardship, depravity, trauma, and endless grief. As life moved on after the end of the Second World War, new problems set in for the Naga community. The memory of older Khonou has witnessed a significant political upheaval after the departure of the British in 1947. The denial to grant the status of the new nation to the Nagas, its territorial divide between India and Burma, the fight for Naga sovereignty, and the formation of the Naga National Council in 1946 remain historical markers in the modern Naga historical context. For Khonou, it brings tears every time she recounts the sufferings of her people perpetrated by the Indian armed forces through the 1958 Armed Forces Special Powers Act (AFSPA). Women have often carried the brunt of the fight between the Indian forces and the Naga

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insurgency groups even as many Naga men gave their lives for the cause. Khonou bitterly speaks out:

We were no longer safe in our own house…Life was much worse than it was during the Japanese war. In those days, although bombs were falling around us, we were never the target of the bombings. British and Indian soldiers came by the thousands but we never feared them; we knew they were there to protect our lands (59-59).

For Khonou and her people, this persisting question would perpetually remain elusive as they ask, "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). This inquiry underpins that for the Nagas, the Indian domination over Nagaland is the real war that continues to be a difficult challenge.

Mari and Khonou's narratives help the reader connect with the real people who lived through war times and with the place, Kohima. Likewise, in *ARW*, Kire included a section at the end called "Mapping Kohima" which documents some factual accounts of the post-war Kohima by reconstructing the nooks and crannies of the town. Thus, the iconic places in Kohima are increasingly becoming sites of memory that bear the marks of the Battle of Kohima. History, indeed, comes alive through the memories of people. Since reconstructing a whole town through memories of the generation that lived through the war is not easy, she firmly believes that "Recreating pre-war Kohima using their memories was a challenging task but it was not impossible" (164). Such authentic recollections infuse the reader to see the old Kohima come alive as one reads the narrative! But what emerges rather strongly in these two historical fictions is the transmission of memories chiefly by women, thus charting a narrative that would form a core of historical records.

Collective Remembrance and Cultural Memory

Witnesses' account of the historical past as a genre holds immense importance in the re-imagination of the events and how they impact individuals and the community. Such narratives not only help us see history in a different light but also draw our interest in certain characters or

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events that never may have been mentioned in other historical narratives. Similar to many narratives centered on the people's experiences of major phases in history, the Naga writings discussed here are vital to reconstructing people's history. More importantly, these stories bear weight because they are insider accounts. A critical assessment of these narratives is indispensable in re-imagining past events and how they shape the lives of individuals who lived through them. Often "state-sponsored" memorials and monuments shape the memories of war. In the Northeast of India, such official memorialization generates absorbing interest because "collective memories are produced, sustained and responded to in state-sponsored public spaces like museums, memorials, and monuments" (Guite 2011, 56). Taking Manipur as a case study, Guite argues that despite historical facts pointing to "six major anti-colonial movements" (58) from different sections of the state holding equal importance in the imagination of the people, the "Anglo-Manipur war overshadowed the historical imagination of the postcolonial Manipur state" (61).

Even in the case of the Battle of Kohima, the war memorial in the heart of the city stands as the "official" memory where the names inscribed on the stones are continually valorized. Following the other war memorials, only the names of soldiers who died in action are remembered. In the theater of war, we seldom find mention of the civilians who are affected, whether as dead or victims, as they perpetually remain non-political entities. Perhaps, therefore, it is safely appropriate to state that memorials of war, whether artifacts or place or structure, can "unavoidably create a distinct political landscape" (Moya 1988, 62). Such memorials in the public realm are not just instituted to "evoke war history but also serve the more important function of conjuring the history that society wants to remember" Moya further points out (72). In this sense, there is usually an underlying politics of 'what' and 'how' to remember the event that matters in understanding history. But a wholesome reading of history is when the memories of the common folks take centerstage – it is their "acts of remembrance" that construct/render the past more meaningful. Whether it is the individual or the collective memories of the past event, over time, "a cultural memory is constructed" as Frank Jacob and Kenneth Pearl (2019, 4) would put it. This perspective is well in place since it eventually shapes the identity of the people to a certain extent through exposure to external ideas, establishing newer relationships with other societies, or interjecting even new values.

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In discussing the Battle of Kohima, a question is asked about the position of the Nagas during wartime. Most British military narratives wrote favorably of the Nagas and their support in the war, but it is doubtful if such narratives portrayed a holistic picture. Although there was visible support for the British in and around Kohima, primarily because of the seat of colonial power in the Naga Hills, an ostensibly friendly relationship, had already been established. Further away from the center of the action, most of the Naga villagers did not see the Japanese as enemies, either on their entry or their retreat. On the contrary, A. Z Phizo, even though he had not emerged as the Naga nationalist leader at this point, had apparently "made a pack with the Japanese in Burma to help them in return for Japanese help to throw out the British from the Naga Hills" (Chasie & Fecitt 2017, 61-62). In other words, away from Kohima, the Naga villagers played the traditional good host to the Japanese soldiers, but out of sympathy for the weary strangers. A more tenable observation of the Naga position is, as Chasie & Fecitt would put it, "…as a people, the Nagas had no position in the war and remained neutral. Many also helped the Japanese. The Nagas had little or no reason to fight for the British…and certainly they had no reason to fight for the Japanese who they had never encountered till now" (2017, 54). Whatever the position of the Nagas, however ambiguous it seems at times, the truth remains that the Great War left an undeletable memory. This event marked a crucial change in their understanding of the past.

For the Nagas, the Battle of Kohima in the Second World War is indelibly etched in their memory, not only in the manner it exposed them to large-scale modern warfare but also in the changes that came with it. And these changes are noteworthy. First, the war is remembered for ushering in technological modernity to the extent that the erstwhile local had been infused with the global. The words of Khunuo in *ARW* beautifully sum it up: "The war brought the outside world so much closer to us; in fact, it brought the world to us. And it brought home the reality of death to our young minds" (2019, 54). This, as mentioned earlier, was made possible through the availability of radio and other forms of mass communication. The post-war scene saw the British government actively involved in rebuilding the war-ravaged Naga Hills, especially roads, and providing materials to build individual houses. They owe those minimal efforts for the reconstruction of Naga's lives, considering it was their warplanes that bombed the villages, destroyed roads, and caused unforetold damage to the people on whose land they fought the war.

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Personal narratives from *The Battle of Kohima* fuse both horrifying encounters of death and their experiences of observing modern warfare and weaponry, mainly from a distance.

Secondly, and somewhat related to the previous point, the narratives and testimonials recounted points to how the lifeworld of the Nagas experienced a rapture because of the war. While the physical restoration was perceivable and was restored to normalcy in a good sense, the trauma caused by the war and the individual suffering, including the loss of livestock, could never be reinstated at that point in a historical moment. Besides, since the war occurred during a crucial phase of the agricultural life cycle, the prospect of a fruitful year was hampered severely, being an agrarian society. In this sense, there was a severe disruption in the day-to-day function of the people. Though the Nagas managed to limp back to a normal life subsequently, the Second World War drastically changed their memories of recent history. For them, the *Japanese war* (literal translation from the native languages) would become a significant historical marker because the exposure to the large-scale war impacted their imagination in the long run. Because writing as a medium of telling is a recent trend among Nagas, there have not been many materials made available. However, the Naga memory of the "Great War" remains an epochal interjection as their oral history testifies.

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