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War, Memory and Subaltern Historiography: Rewriting War Histories Through Indigenous Memory in The Selected Works of Easterine Kire and Temsula Ao

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ABSTRACT

The history of Nagaland has always been presented through reductive colonial stereotypes that reduce the complexity of Naga culture and politics to simplistic and inaccurate terms. Perhaps, there is no more significant example of this than the way in which the Battle of Kohima and the insurgency that continued after the annexation of Nagaland have been discussed, with indigenous experiences completely erased from the mainstream narrative. This paper analyzes how indigenous experiences are recovered and recentered in the works of Easterine Kire and Temsula Ao. Naga novels and stories, such as Mari, Bitter Wormwood, and "The Last Song", put forward the experiences of civilians during the period of warfare, displacement, and militarization. This study will draw on memory studies, postcolonial studies, and trauma studies to demonstrate how literature challenges the dominant narrative and re-centers subaltern memory to explain how violence generates historically constructed "confused identities".

Keywords: *Battle of Kohima, Indigenous Memory, Historiography, Insurgency, War, Violence, Resistance, Identity.*

Introduction

The history of Nagaland has often been constructed through a series of misleading stereotypes that have come to define the Naga people as mere tribal "headhunters." These stereotypes have served to conceal the complex cultural and political histories of the Nagas. Colonial histories of the Naga region often characterized headhunting as a marker of savagery, without regard for its cultural importance to indigenous societies. The British colonial expansion into the Naga Hills dates back to the nineteenth century and eventually resulted in administrative control over the region between 1832 and 1947. During this period, colonial experiences were often characterized by violence, including village burning, displacement, and military campaigns to quell Naga resistance (Yhome 144).

The strategic importance of the Naga Hills became evident during the Second World War, when the Japanese attempted to invade India through the northeastern frontier. This invasion culminated in the Battle of Kohima, which continued from April to June 1944 between the Japanese and Allied forces, led by the British Empire. The battle has been described as the "Stalingrad of the East" (Dougherty 159) due to its magnitude and importance. The Battle of Kohima has also been referred to as "India's forgotten battle of World War II," even though its importance in determining the outcome of the war in Asia cannot be ignored (Aurora). According to Mmhonlümo Kikon, the Battle of Kohima "marked

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the end of Japan's effort to invade India and join forces with the Indian independence forces against the British Raj," thus determining the outcome of the war in the region (qtd. in Sempa).

The importance of the Battle of Kohima lies not only in its military consequences but also in the role played by local communities. Naga civilians actively assisted Allied forces during the conflict, serving as porters, labourers, scouts, stretcher-bearers, and intelligence gatherers. Their knowledge of the terrain proved crucial in maintaining supply lines and navigating the difficult mountainous landscape of the Naga Hills. Kikon emphasizes the resilience and bravery demonstrated by the local population during the conflict, describing the "courage and fortitude" displayed by the Naga people in resisting the Japanese advance (qtd. in Sempa).

The history of the relationship between the British administration and the Naga people was characterized by tensions and rebellions. However, the conditions of the war changed the dynamics of the relationship. As the Japanese soldiers entered the region, their harsh attitude towards the people of Nagaland forced the Naga villagers to support the Allied soldiers. This created a temporary strategic alliance between the British military and the Naga people despite the history of colonial wars (Yhome 145). The war had a negative impact on the region. The war affected dozens of Naga villages directly, and the people of Nagaland had to face displacement, violence, and destruction during the war.

Although the contribution of Naga civilians and volunteers has been critical to the war, their contribution has not been sufficiently acknowledged. For instance, the Kohima War Cemetery, which is one of the most prominent war memorials, only recognizes Allied soldiers, while the contribution of the Naga people has not been sufficiently included in the history books. The only Naga war veteran to have been formally honoured is Saliezu Angami, while the contribution of the villagers in assisting the war effort has not been sufficiently acknowledged (Yhome 145). Mmhonlümo Kikon says that much of the existing scholarship on the Battle of Kohima has focused on imperial military perspectives, while "there has never been a narrative from the Naga side." (qtd. in Aurora) This lack of acknowledgement reflects a broader pattern of historical erasure in which Indigenous contributions to global conflicts remain underrepresented.

Due to this lack in the official history of the state, many memories of the war have been retained in the oral tradition of the Naga communities. The experiences of suffering, survival, and resistance during the war continue to be told and retold in the local storytelling tradition. Literature has thus emerged as an important medium through which these experiences are retained and reinterpreted. Modern Naga writers go back to the events of the Battle of Kohima to highlight the Indigenous experiences that have been overlooked in mainstream history. These literary works bring the attention of the reader away from the military tactics of the war to the experiences of the civilians who lived through the violence of war. Through these literary works, the events of the war are told from the Naga experience, challenging the dominant historical narratives and helping to retrieve the Indigenous memory. As Kikon powerfully states in the context of Naga resistance during the war,

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"the Samurai surrendered to the Naga Dao," a phrase that metaphorically points to the bravery and agency of the local communities in the face of the imperial conflict (qtd. in Sempa).

World War II, the Japanese Invasion, and Civilian Suffering in *Mari*

Veena Gour affirms that most Indians have forgotten that the Battle of Kohima was one of the great Allied victories in World War II, even though it is a fact that "the outcome of this particular battle had a significant impact on the outcome of the war in Asia" (Gour 29). The Japanese army, after their successful campaign in Burma in 1941-42, attempted to move forward and invade India through the Naga Hills. However, this attempt failed as the British Allied forces were able to defeat the Japanese army with the help of the Nagas. The Japanese army, weakened by illness and hunger, gave up its plan to invade India. The Battle of Kohima is a "forgotten battle" for the Nagas, while those who helped in the war are known as "forgotten heroes" (Gour 29). Kire's Mari commemorates this particular event in history by narrating the events of the war in the form of a personal diary of Mari, whose life is set against the backdrop of the turmoil of war.

The novel has been presented in the form of a diary written by Mari and reflects the daily lives of people living through the war. The story contains elements of a love story, but also highlights the social and cultural upsets caused by the war. As Patton explains, the novel reflects the uprooting of the Naga people during the Second World War and reflects the struggles of the people living through the war (Patton 31). The Japanese army finally entered Kohima town in April 1944, and the people of Kohima town had to leave their homes and take refuge in nearby villages such as Kigwema, Chieswema, Ruzoma, Tsiekhou, and forests (Sarkar and Gaur 11). The town was once bustling with activity but had become a battleground, and the destruction of war is reflected when Mari writes, the town of Kohima "was ablaze and covered with thick black smoke" (Kire, *Mari* 56).

The novel also gives an account of the fear and instability experienced by the people as the Japanese army invaded the region. Sarkar and Gaur explain that the invading army plundered food supplies, occupied homes forcefully, and killed innocent people after forcing them to divulge information about the terrain and the movements of Allied forces (Sarkar and Gaur 11). The violence experienced during this period is further highlighted by the rape incidents experienced by women in the region. This dark aspect of the war is also unspoken in public discourse. According to Teronpi, the discussion about the atrocities committed by the Japanese army in the region is only shared by the elderly in hushed tones because rape is considered one of the most serious crimes in Naga society and is unheard of before the arrival of the Japanese army in the region (Teronpi 135). Through these accounts, the novel brings to light a silenced history of wartime violence inflicted upon the civilian population.

The fear experienced by the villagers is also demonstrated by the episodes where the villagers attempted to flee the advancing army by seeking refuge in the forest and other remote areas. The jungle, which had provided the impression of safety for the villagers, was eventually characterized by moments of uncertainty and vulnerability. One such episode is where Mari and her company sought

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refuge in the forest together with other displaced people. Their safety was always at stake because of the constant danger posed by the presence of the Japanese soldiers. Mari explains the moments of tension experienced by the group as they remained concealed in the forest, as the soldiers sat for hours. Mari explains that the soldiers did not notice her and continued sitting for many hours, leaving Mari, her sisters, the woman, and her children exposed because the only male among them, young Jimmy, would not be able to defend them (Kire, *Mari* 72).

The large number of internally displaced civilians resulting from this battle also changed the physical and social landscape of Kohima. When people moved away from the battle-scarred area and into the jungles and villages, the places that were previously inhabited were then characterized by a sense of desolation and emptiness. The change in the landscape from a place of comfort to a setting of battle and bloodshed is a clear indicator of the impact that this war had on the lives of individuals in those areas. Through such depictions, the novel reconstructs the atmosphere of fear, uncertainty, and devastation that characterized the region during the Japanese invasion.

Through its account of displacement, violence, and the destruction of village life, Mari's narrative creates a history of the social impact of the Battle of Kohima from the point of view of those living in the region, rather than those directing the armies. Thus, the narrative becomes a form of alternative history, where the focus is on the vulnerability of indigenous populations caught between imperial forces. Through the form of a diary, the novel records the impact of the disturbances created on the cultural and social life of the Naga people, revealing how, through its account, the global conflict of the Second World War was experienced as a crisis of displacement, bodily insecurity, and communal loss. Thus, Kire's novel not only re-creates the history of the Battle of Kohima but it expands its historiographical parameters by addressing the civilian side of the conflict, which is largely absent in military histories of the conflict.

Insurgency, Militarization, and the Making of Resistance

The postcolonial history of Nagaland is deeply marked by insurgency, militarization, and suppression of indigenous movements of resistance through violence beyond imagination. As discussed by Kire in the Author's Note, the Naga fight for freedom was "cleverly concealed" through the strict censorship of media and journalistic reports, thus silencing the atrocities committed against the people (Kire, *Bitter Wormwood* 1). In this context of deliberate erasure, Naga literature re-creates a history of atrocities through recorded testimonies and experiences, placing the lives of common villagers like Mose, Libeni, and Apenyo at the heart of the narratives.

Kire emphasizes the extent of the conflicts and insurgency through references to reports like that of the International Work Group for Indigenous Affairs, which states that close to 100,000 Nagas were killed in direct conflict, with many more dying of starvation and disease during the peak decades of the insurgency (Kire, *Bitter Wormwood* 2). The emphasis of the novels, however, is on the translation of these statistics into lived realities. The use of torture as a means of control by the military is highlighted as an important aspect of the war, with victims suffering extreme forms of

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brutality, including being "tied to poles and burned alive," mutilation, and "electric shocks" that aimed at annihilating the very essence of humanity (Kire, *Bitter Wormwood* 2-3).

The militarized environment had a major influence on the lives of the people, even in their private spaces, with the armed forces engaging in practices that included the search of houses. These practices were justified by laws that included the Assam Maintenance of Public Order Act of 1953, which gave the armed forces the right to "shoot and kill, in case it is felt necessary to do so for maintaining of public order" (Kire, *Bitter Wormwood* 73). Within such an oppressive system, civilian existence became precarious and unprotected. This reality is starkly illustrated in the killing of Mose's grandmother: "The bullet that had entered the back of her had killed her" (Kire, *Bitter Wormwood* 71). Similarly, incidents of open firing that claimed the lives of women, men, and children reinforce the sense that violence was arbitrary, pervasive, and normalized.

The character of Mose is born out of this continuum of violence, and his journey is shaped by a series of encounters with loss, injustice, and fear. His politicization is not based on any political ideology but on his experiences, such as witnessing the annihilation of his community, the breach of social norms, and the glorification of brutality. The exposure to such situations creates a psychological rupture that makes him realize that neutrality is not possible, leading him to join the Underground Army secretly. The transformation of Mose illustrates how prolonged exposure to violence converts passive civilians into agents of resistance and chooses the path of violence, linking personal grief with political insurgency.

Gender violence is another key aspect of this militarized reality. Kire, in her work, has highlighted the way in which Naga women were made targets of sexual violence. She has pointed out the way in which the female body was used as a tool for domination and control. Warnings such as "Women, be very careful" (Kire, *Bitter Wormwood* 69) indicate the way in which fear was institutionalized in the Naga society. The brutal rape and murder of a woman in Kohima, along with the accompanying threat, "We will do that to all those who oppose us" (Kire, *Bitter Wormwood* 83), indicates the way in which sexual violence was used as a tool for psychological domination and control. The large-scale violence, such as the burning of villages and the desecration of sacred spaces such as the Yenkali church, indicates the way in which violence was extended to the cultural and spiritual domains of the Naga people (Kire, *Bitter Wormwood,* 2-3).

This pattern of military brutality has a powerful literary analogy in "The Last Song" by Temsula Ao, which is itself rooted in the historical reality of army brutality in Naga villages. As described by Subir Bhaumik, Temsula Ao has "meticulously crafted the character of the little girl, Apenyo, with minute details of innocence, devotion to God, coupled with an inherent flair for singing" (Bhaumik 11). The crafting of this innocence makes the brutality that follows even more stark. Apenyo's existence is rooted in the village culture, as her mother, Libeni, "had a reputation of being one of the best weavers in the village," and Apenyo "too learned the art from her mother and became an excellent weaver like her" (Ao 24-25). In addition, her voice is what makes her presence felt in the

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church choir, as "every time the choir sang it was her voice that made the commonest song sound heavenly" (Ao 25).

The invasion of the army interrupts the space of cultural and spiritual harmony. Apenyo's action of singing is taken as defiance. "The soldiers were incensed; it was an act of open defiance, and proper retaliation had to be made" (Ao 27). However, "only Apenyo stood her ground" (Ao 27), which makes her the target of retaliatory violence. Apenyo is taken and subjected to savage gangrape, as witnessed by Libeni:

"the young Captain was raping Apenyo while a few other soldiers were watching the act and seemed to be waiting for their turn" (Ao 27).

The collective nature of this act reveals how sexual violence operates not as an isolated incident but as a performative assertion of power. Libeni's attempt at intervening, as she charges at the soldiers in desperation, is immediately halted as she is apprehended, tortured, and raped to death.

The violence takes the form of collective punishment, where the army destroys the entire village to show "what happens when you 'betray' your own government" (Ao 26). The burning of the church turns a sacred space into a space of annihilation. This is evident in the image of the aftermath: "Among the rain-drenched ashes of the old church, they found masses of human bones…a piece of Apenyo's new shawl was found…Mother and daughter lay together in that pile" (Ao 30). The interrelatedness of sexual violence, mass killings, and the destruction of sacred space points to the way militarized power works through totalizing violence, which is physical, psychological, and cultural.

The portrayal of gendered violence in these texts adds another layer of complexity to the dominant war narrative as it highlights how the female body becomes a contested space of power, control, and symbolic domination. The experiences of women in Kire's and Ao's works resonate with Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak's implication that the subaltern woman is doubly colonized—both by colonial/state power and by patriarchal structures – "The woman is doubly in shadow" (qtd. in Williams and Chrisman). Yet, these texts also resist reducing women to mere victims; instead, they position them as central to the processes of memory, mourning, and cultural continuity.

Conclusion

Naga literature does not only seek to rediscover lost histories; it also seeks to reveal the very mechanisms through which such forgetting is achieved. The non-inclusion of the Nagas in the dominant discourse of the Second World War and the insurgency is not coincidental; it is structural and can be seen as part of the framework that Michel Foucault has described as the interplay of power and knowledge (Foucault 34). The telling of history is contingent upon the regime of power that prioritizes the telling of some histories over the telling of other histories. Kire and Ao disrupt this regime of power by placing subaltern memory at its core. Moreover, their literature does not ask to be included in history; they question whether existing mainstream historical frameworks are adequate to represent indigenous experience at all.

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The continuum of violence, from the Japanese invasion in *Mari* to the postcolonial militarization portrayed in *Bitter Wormwood* and "The Last Song", shows that the experience of violence in Nagaland cannot be circumscribed within temporal limits. What these texts portray, in fact, is what Cathy Caruth calls the belated and repetitive nature of trauma (Caruth 7), that is, an experience that is not fully assimilated in the course of its occurrence but keeps recurring in time. The repetition of violence in these texts is thus structural, pointing to the persistence of unresolved historical violence.

The repetition of these histories points to a more profound crisis of identity in Naga society, one that is a product of a variety of influences from colonialism, war, insurgency, and state formation. The fragmented nature of the subjectivities in these texts is a product of what is identified by postcolonial theory as a fundamental instability in identity in a state of political and cultural domination. The notion of a "confused identity" (Kire, *Bitter Wormwood* 4) is thus not merely a psychological state but is historically constructed from a tension between indigenous and national identities.

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