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Research Scholar

An International Refereed e-Journal of Literary Explorations

ISSN 2320 – 6101

www.researchscholar.co.in

REMEMBERING COMMUNITY: COLLECTIVE MEMORY IN EASTERINE KIRE'S *SKY IS MY FATHER: A NAGA VILLAGE REMEMBERED*

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Abstract

Literary narratives rooted in indigenous identity very often arise from an anxiety that fears an erosion or complete overhaul of native ways of life, culture and memories under the onslaught of homogenising forces. In this scenario, literature goes beyond its storytelling function, it works to hold a community's consciousness together. Easterine Kire's *Sky Is My Father: A Naga Village Remembered* recreates the 19th century Angami Naga life by intermingling what she terms as 'historical fiction' with social practices and inter-generational memory by drawing significantly on oral traditions. This paper employs Maurice Halbwachs' notion of collective memory and Birgit Neumann's thought on literary memory to explore how the novel sustains Naga communal awareness through the act of storytelling, warrior ethos, ritual life, and a sense of locatedness for a distinct place. The paper argues that memory sustains not so much through written documentation as through shared participation and through the repetition of cultural practices in transcribing oral traditions into literary form. The text carves out a space where cultural identity and collective remembrance, merge to ensure a certain continuity of cultural thought.

Keywords: collective memory, indigenous narrative, Naga literature, oral tradition, cultural memory

Introduction

The late 20th century's memory boom sought to focus on the ways in which communities record the past outside the bounds of official history. In *Theories of Memory: A Reader*, Michael Rossington and Anne Whitehead point out that memory gained legitimacy as an interdisciplinary field precisely because it opened alternative pathways into history, identity, and cultural experience. For indigenous communities this shift was significant as outsider narratives and colonial records replete with white man's bias as the white man's burden threatened to white wash the real experience of a community.

A significant body of indigenous literature rises from an increasing need to safeguard stories, customs, and memories that continue to define a community identity even while they are absent from dominant historical discourse. Literature functions in far more significant ways here as it goes beyond recounting events, it carries cultural knowledge forward. This becomes

strikingly evident in *Sky Is My Father: A Naga Village Remembered,* set against the backdrop of 19th century encounters between the Angami Nagas and British colonial forces.

The novel is mostly categorised as historical fiction. However, it can as persuasively be read as a narrative of collective memory, attempting to rebuild communal consciousness through engaging in aspects of oral storytelling, inherited beliefs, social customs, and record of everyday cultural life. The novel does not solely confine itself to historical clashes. It attends equally to ordinary spaces, domestic domains, cultural spaces, stories, moving from person to person where intergenerational continuity becomes alive, and where cultural values steadily gather meaning over time.

This paper engages with the novel through Maurice Halbwachs' idea that memory lives inside social groups and shared frameworks while simultaneously drawing on Birgit Neumann's argument that literary narratives do not merely reflect cultural remembrance, they actively shape and transmit it. What this novel attempts to preserve is not just the memory of historical conflict, but the memory of the entire way of life. It accomplishes it through imbibing aspects of oral tradition , communal gathering, and capturing the ethos of the people, be it through its brooding on warrior ethics, or ritual practices or a deep attachment to the village Khonoma itself.

Oral storytelling becomes, at the outset, most significant aspect of the novel. Apart from including certain Angami words in the text, Kire also provides a Glossary of such terms at the end of the novel. Additionally, how oral storytelling becomes a community or how a community strengthens its identity based on storytelling is very significantly embodied in the structure of the thehou. The thehou is the community house where men of all ages gather. The novel reveals how "Talk at the thehou, the community house, often centered round what was called man's talk," and that "reminiscing about hunts and battles in the past made the thehou a place where any youth with a man's heart inside him would linger and listen or add his stories as well." The thehou emerges as something far more than a physical building. It acts, in effect, as an informal village archive, a space where stories travel from one generation straight into the perception and imaginations of the next.

While the act of storytelling imparts cultural codes among other knowledge sharing practices, the act of listening becomes as much significant. Young men gather, not passively to hear and doubt, but to absorb the values that are shared there. The narrative notes that they "came to learn the stories of the village." Memory, seen this way, is not a solitary inward retreat but something social and participatory—a living exchange sustained by presence and attention. Maurice Halbwachs's argument that memory persists primarily inside collective frameworks, held together by ongoing community interaction, explains memory as socially driven rather than an individual possession.

The novel directly associates social standing, and intimacy with communal knowledge. Someone "well-versed in the stories and customs of the village." is described as a respected person. This suggests that remembering becomes more than a mental exercise as it is tied to belonging itself. The rememberer of the stories thus becomes a part of ongoing life of the community, signaling that one becomes woven into its continuity rather than standing outside it.

Birgit Neumann contends that literature does not simply depict memory—it helps actively transmit and shape cultural remembrance. Kire's novel performs that very function by translating oral narrative into literary form. Though written in English and inevitably directed at a wider readership, the text preserves the rhythms of spoken storytelling and the communal texture of remembered experience. The depiction of the thehou embeds hitherto a physical structure in the literary imagination of the reader, and the novel itself becomes somewhat like the thehou.

In addition to the oral tradition narrative reflected in the novel, memory also becomes tightly linked with the warrior ethos, honour, and communal pride. The conversations in the novel repeatedly circle around bravery, revenge, resistance, and the duty to defend the village. The emotional or the effective linkage to one's identity and prestige becomes equally weighted in the subsequent events leading to the colonial conflict which history remembers as 'The Battle of Khonoma'.

The memory of resistance survives through retelling, but the emphasis falls less on military specifics than on the shared right, the recollection stirs. A speaker records at the thehou, "We caught them by surprise, waylaying them and killing twenty-two of them". Stories like these continue to shape the village's sense of itself. The necessity of revenge and the question of honour which dominate the ethos of the village. comes into sharp focus when a character declares, "It was a matter of honour… a man is not a man if you let another man kill your kin and torch your houses and you do nothing about it." In moments like these, memory preserves social values right alongside historical experience. Bravery is remembered precisely because it shores up the community's moral sense of who it is.

The language around culture and muscularity is at times strong. Men who refuse to defend the village are called "Thenumia," or women. Without dismissing the gender prejudice at work, it is just as important to note how profoundly ideas of honour and warfare are threaded into the community's social imagination. The stories that fill the thehou keep circulating these values, a sign that communal remembrance is shaped as intensely by emotion and pride as by the bare facts of what happened.

In addition to the dramatic narratives that enlighten with the warrior ethos of the community, what reinforces community pride is also the texture of daily practice. Wrestling, for instance, holds a prominent place in village life. Kire notes that "Next to battle sport, wrestling was the other man's game so popular among the men, old and young." Details like this might seem incidental at first, yet they quietly reconstruct a world where martial values were sown into ordinary existence, not just reserved for moments of crisis.

Gradually, Khonoma itself becomes inseparable from this remembered culture of martial might. One elder insists, "Let the white man know that Khonoma is different from the other villages, that there are men still living here." The statement lifts the village out of geography and turns it into a reputation—a living symbol of collective dignity kept alive through repeated acts of remembrance of masculine prowess that its martial nature embodies. The novel further observes that, "The exploits of the warriors made other events seem to pale no matter how extraordinary they were." The line matters because it exposes how collective memory selects and elevates certain experiences while letting others fall away. Heroic acts remain at the centre because they continually renew the community's understanding of itself.

Furthermore, the memory in the novel can also be read through ritual practices and inherited beliefs. Such remembrance is not confined to stories of warfare or resistance alone. It also holds the customs, taboos and social rituals that continue to structure communal life. The novel vividly portrays Angami Naga life and its celebrations and marital rituals, festivals, and feasts.

An instance, in this case can be the treatment of lashü death—the death of a woman during childbirth or labour. The community approaches such deaths with a mixture of fear and ritual gravity. When the midwife states, "No mourning for a lashü death, it is taboo," the prohibition against mourning instantly exposes how thoroughly cultural beliefs can regulate both

emotional expression and social conduct. What makes this episode especially interesting is the way memory passes from one generation to the next. The narrative notes that Kovi "recollected all that he had heard as a child about a lashü death." The line illuminates something significant about how memory works in the novel. Kovi's understanding does not spring from firsthand experience alone. It has already been shaped—long before the present moment—by stories, warnings, and beliefs repeated since childhood.

The novel further notes that "The strictest of taboos was upon the lashü death." The woman's body is removed through an opening cut into the wall, not through the doorway, because such deaths rank among the "most abominable of apotia deaths." Through details like these, narrative subtly reconstructs an entire system of cultural belief. What stands out here is that memory surfaces not as abstract historical awareness but as something woven into ordinary, everyday behaviour. Ritual repetition keeps cultural knowledge alive even when the original reasons behind those practices may have long ceased to be articulated. Inherited customs, in this sense, become carriers of collective memory in their own right.

In the novel, collective memory also anchors itself firmly in the memory of the place, which, in this case, is the village of Khonoma. Place becomes more important than just a physical setting of a story, it becomes a vessel for memory in its own right. Khonoma acts as an emotional heart of community identity and it is recalled so time and again. Memories of resistance, bravery ,raids, funerals, and loss fasten themselves to the landscape so that the ground itself becomes a site of that which the community refuses to forget.

The insistent claim that Khonoma stands "different from the other villages" carries more than local pride; it signifies the deep affective weight the place carries. Khonoma turns into a symbol of endurance and collective dignity. Even casual conversations about conflict revolve around the imperative that the village safeguard its name and standing.

At certain points, memory and landscape nearly fuse. The narrative notes that "the burial-houses of these men were terrible to see," directly binding the physical site to histories of suffering and war. The community's emotional past remains lodged in the terrain, not abstracted from it. This anchoring to place matters because it keeps memory from drifting into abstraction. Stories cling to houses, pathways, burial sites, and communal gathering spots. Khonoma, then, operates as far more than a backdrop to events; it functions as a living repository where collective remembrance is stored in tangible structures, locations, stones, and earth.

Conclusion

Sky Is My Father: A Naga Village Remembered reimagines collective psyche not simply through its depictions of conflict but through the cultural frameworks that allow remembrance to persist inside the community. Oral storytelling, ritual observance, the warrior ethos, and a rooted attachment to place together interweave a dense network through which Naga social memory continues to flourish and move forward.

Perhaps the novel's greatest achievement is its attentiveness to the ordinary work of remembering. Stories traded in the thehou, inherited belief systems, the vivid rendering of festivals and feasts, and the repeated recollection of Khonoma's courage—all of these testify that memory survives by participation and repetition far more than by written record. However, fictionalising this village life further immortalises it. Approached this way, the novel becomes something beyond a historical reconstruction of nineteenth-century Naga life. It emerges as an effort to preserve the emotional and cultural universe through which the community makes sense of its own past. By translating oral tradition into literary narrative, Kire allows these memories to

travel past the immediate edges of the village while, simultaneously , retaining their communal soul.

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