

Reclaiming Lost Narratives: Cultural Memory, Historical Transformation, and the Quest for Authenticity in Angami and Naga Literature*

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Abstract

'Any individual within a culture is going to have his or her interpretation of the collective cultural code; however, the individual's worldview has its roots in the culture—that is, in the society's shared philosophy, values and customs' (Saul 194). But what if the passage of time significantly influences our shared philosophy, perception, and retelling of histories? The lack of evidence and the malleability of human memory can transform real events into stories, myths, or folktales. This research paper, by textually analyzing two novels, The Black Hill and A Respectable Woman by Angami and Naga writers, Mamang Dai and Easterine Kire, respectively, aims to explore how histories change over time and how factors like cultural hegemony and social memory contribute to their transformation. It throws light on the fact that it is also important to promote a clear, crisp, and authentic understanding of history by encouraging people to question sources, recognize biases, and appreciate the complexity of the past.

Keywords: Colonization, Culture, History, Myths, Storytelling

Introduction

Where did this feeling of ecstasy come from? It came from loving the land, from looking at the light lifting the hills and burnishing them for the gods. It came from living in contentment with the river and trees and fighting and losing and struggling, and realizing, one day, how closely all life and land is tied together. (Dai 1)

Combining history, myth, narratives, and contemporary situations gives one a brief idea of the past, which leads one to a feeling of connectedness to their land and their beginnings. It brings them a bit closer to the point that led to a series of events occurring one after the other. What we see today is a land that has undergone so much. It, too, has stories to tell and grieves to lament. This gives rise to a feeling of belongingness and attachment to a land as angelic as a mother.

The present research paper primarily focuses on the changing narratives, culture, nature, history, and ultimately the changed story of the beginnings of a land through the application of theories like memory studies and cultural studies to the selected novels of Northeast Indian writers Mamang Dai and Easterine Kire. This research paper emphasizes how sudden changes in the cultural milieu of a place affect not only the people and their mindset but also leave behind a series of destructive aftereffects on the environment, culture, and tradition as well. These aftereffects are vividly visible and reflected in the novels, poems, and other literary

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pieces coming from the region. This research paper takes into account the novels by two eminent authors from the region, namely Mamang Dai and Easterine Kire.

The Northeast Indian novelists, poets, and writers have discussed the beauty of the tradition of storytelling but also at the same time mentioned the uncertainty and the unreliability of these stories. In addition to this, they discuss issues such as environmental distortion, ‘mutation of identity’ (Singh and Negi 282), and the decline of oral narratives. These issues form the base for this research. The Northeastern region of the Indian subcontinent is a beautiful but comparatively less explored region having unmatched natural beauty. The literary artists of this region have highlighted various rich aspects of its ecology through their novels and poems. Mamang Dai and Easterine Kire, the literary figures from Arunachal Pradesh and Nagaland, respectively, have gloriously described their ecocultural practices, traditions, myths, oral narratives, etc., and have created awareness about the deteriorating environmental conditions and the subsequent loss of cultural heritage.

But the more I wrote, the more confused I became. So I also read what others wrote. And the more I read, the more convinced I became that I was not alone in my confusion. Through my long association with these other equally baffled individuals, the only conclusion I have come up with so far is that perplexities about notions of roots, identity and belonging are meant only for exploration. There are no closures to questions pertaining to them. Yet we explore, and yet we strive. And yet, we get together, some of us, to put together a journal such as this that continues to raise more questions than provide answers. (Goswami 22-24)

This is a forever ongoing discourse that the above passage brings to the front, about the present picture of ‘Northeast India’ as a territorial jurisdiction or a geographical marker that has been assigned to the region for a very long time. The nation has classified more than half a dozen states based on their geographical location. The question here arises: can naming a bunch of states according to their geographical location be justified?

Such generalizations usually come with a few unanswered questions, such as, is the Northeast an ‘amalgamation’ of 7-8 states or a ‘single homogenous entity’? Where should one place oneself when there arises the question of your home, your nativity, your belongingness? The ideas of home, identity, and belonging seem to come to a halt when the issue of generalization arises. How much can you relate to, and how does the Northeast relate to, as a whole, the various parts that it is comprised of, and to an even larger entity that it is part of, the nation—India? Indira Goswami in the quoted paragraph goes on to discuss how confused she was when her classmates generalized her identity as someone from the Northeast and didn’t bother to ask her about the state or the origin. She says, “There are no closures to questions pertaining to them” (23), which describes the helplessness of the child who couldn’t convince and was left with no answers. Yet, she strives to ‘explore’ so that someday she will have answers to the questions she couldn’t answer as a child.

Discussion

The passage of time has a significant impact on how histories are perceived and retold. The lack of evidence and the malleability of human memory can transform real events into stories, myths, or folktales. The novel in consideration, *The Black Hill* written by Mamang Dai, hailing from Arunachal Pradesh, depicts the life which was lived by the natives of Arunachal Pradesh during the British and the missionary intervention. The novel is a historical fiction set in 19th-century India before it got its independence and showcases the story of the British and missionary encounter with the local tribes. Dai uses the colonial chronicles to unearth and recast an actual event—the murder of the Jesuit missionaries Father Nicolas Krick and Augustin-Etienne Bourry. These were the missionary priests sent to Tibet via India to propagate Christianity and its ideals. The said priests belonged to France’s *Societe des Missions Etrangères de Paris* (MEP) and were allegedly killed by the Mishmi tribal chief Kaisha.

As documented in Miner’s *China’s Book of Martyrs*,

On September 1st, while approaching the Tibetan border, Chief Kaisha of the Mishmi tribe attacked Krick and Bourry with a group of men armed with spears and machetes. One account record, 'Kaisha caught up with them and cut them to pieces. The grieving villagers buried them with honour under a cairn of stones. (305).

This became news and, subsequently, a history that spread everywhere, like the forest fire, jotted down in various books and magazines. However, the tribal chief's side never received any mention or discussion. According to the novel, Kajinsha (Kaisha—the tribal chief) says, "Tell them we also had some things to say. But we cannot read and write. So we tell stories" (Dai 288).

Considering the dialogue between the tribal chief Kajinsha and Gimur in the novel, there are a few things that are questionable, like the stories of the natives—those that have not been jotted down and, due to a lack of evidence, are not even questioned? And what about the intertribal feuds, which are primarily meant to protect one's culture but end up getting eradicated due to foreign intervention?

Oral traditions frequently transmit stories without written records or tangible evidence to back them up. As a result, these social memories may be based on hearsay or speculation, and their accuracy may be difficult to determine. As said by Maurice Halbwaches, "everything seems to indicate that it [the past] is not preserved, but that it is reconstructed starting from the present" (141). In some cases, the retelling of history is also influenced by political or cultural factors. For example, in many countries, national histories are constructed to emphasize certain events or figures while downplaying others. These narratives are often designed to reinforce a particular national identity and to promote a sense of national pride. However, these narratives can be highly selective and may not accurately reflect the complexities and nuances of historical events.

As time passes, people's memories of events fade and become distorted, and their retelling often becomes embellished or exaggerated. According to the historian and philosopher Hannah Arendt, "Memory preserves only images, not facts; and every image is a symbol" (326). Arendt explains that as memories are passed down from generation to generation, they become transformed into symbols that carry emotional weight and cultural significance, rather than factual accounts of events. Just as Dai mentions in the novel, 'Today, everyone is immersed in work. There are houses to be built and crops to be planted. The children are growing up and that is all that matters. The past is gone (290).

Another factor that contributes to the transformation of history into stories, myths, or folktales is the lack of evidence. "The ravages of time, flood, fire, have destroyed many important government documents of the time, especially those that were housed in Sadiya and Dibrugarh" (Dai 293). These lines in the novel explain how histories are transformed into stories, myths, or folktales due to a variety of factors, including the passage of time, the lack of evidence, and cultural and political influences. While these myths and folk tales can serve important cultural and social functions, it is important to recognize that they are not the same as historical facts. Even a slight mistake in analyzing the true events will lead to a different history and, ultimately, a different story from the beginning. The collective memory (which later gets converted into myths) is "relatively short-lived and subject to being refashioned every few generations as the social context within which a particular collective memory was born changes and transitions into something different" (Marcel & Mucchielli 146). To understand the complexities and nuances of historical events, it is necessary to rely on a range of sources and to approach history with a critical and open-minded perspective.

Foucault asserts that all-powerful individuals shape discourses, and ultimately, they are the ones who write histories. "Once the all-powerful people set their foot on the land, they control every little part of the land be it the natural ecology, the culture, the way people of the land perceive them and also the way they want to be perceived in front of the strangers" (129). It is

also accepted that there are numerous versions of the legends and the histories that have been distorted or misrepresented due to a difference in the mindset of the colonizers or the way they opted to change the whole narrative to glorify themselves or justify their decisions. The narratives and discourses do play dynamic roles in a human's life. The changed narratives do not simply change the events but also the core meanings concerning the person hearing them, thereby changing the orientation of the story of the beginning of a certain land, community, or even a ritual.

This makes the method of storytelling a more enjoyable but less reliable source of information. But they do play a major role in the formation of identities. Humans primarily act based on these constructed identities, which are distinct from their true selves. The first one is the way a person thinks (s)he is according to the world, and the second one is the fact that what (s)he wants to project himself/herself as, concerning the world or the environment that (s)he is living in. These identities directly or indirectly relate to the person's conception of the society and the culture. The stories and legends become an important part of society then. The storyteller shapes the representation of these tales and the setting in which they unfold. Several factors also come into play when discussing the formation of identities through the stories. Who is the native? What is his identity? What defines him? Is it the natural terrain, geographical location, weather, or, most importantly, the environment one is born and raised in?

Identity formation and existence are not isolated processes. The fact that identities are materially and discursively created cannot be ignored; whether latent or conscious, they develop over time and with people around them. Taking into reference the central character of the novel, *The Black Hill*, Kajinsha relates himself to the settlement where he lives:

From here it was a route that Kajinsha knew by heart. They struck north. They were entering the Mishmee territory, moving upstream following the Thlo Brai, the Lohit River that has led them higher and higher into the mountains (Dai, 2014).

The description of nature, the 'Lohit River' (Dai 29), his familiarity with the 'Struck North' (Dai, 2014), and the 'Mishmee territory' (Dai 29) seemed to be something that he owned and could relate to, thereby becoming part of a land where he belonged. Arousing the sentiments of geopiety, Kajinsha feels connected to and at home when he comes back to his land. This gives rise to the ecocultural identity of a person belonging to a place, to which he could relate and go back to. The geography, the natural terrain, and the weather also play a vital role in instilling a sense of belonging and being the descendants of the same ancestors.

Eliot said, "Culture means the way of life of particular people living together in one place and it is made visible in their arts, in their society system, in their habits and customs and their language" (251). The society slowly and deeply absorbs the gradual cultural shift, leaving behind an altered reality that remains visible. This altered reality, which no one ever told or mentioned, gradually became visible to the community's inhabitants. The other selected text that we will be referring to in this research article is *A Respectable Woman*. The novel talks about the social, cultural, and psychological changes that came with the Kohima war—a war that changed the whole course of the history of Nagaland. This novel is considered a memory novel because it makes one explore the region's history and the changed culture post-war and forces one to rethink its roots. The novel starts with a brief introduction by the protagonist herself, Kevinuo, where she writes, "I think I had come past the tumultuous years of adolescence and the rebellion and had settled into a course of study that I liked. I enrolled to take a bachelor's degree in English Literature and eagerly dove into the coursework and the intensive reading it involved" (Kire 17). The protagonist goes back in time to bring to her readers the situation of the old versus the new Nagaland. The war-like situations in the region quickly compelled the state to adopt a Eurocentric approach. This region of India had the impact of the missionary activities to the greatest extent.

“Not only would they learn to bake cake, they would also learn to converse in English and pray a short prayer” (Kire 41). The coming of missionaries, the British army, and traders laid the foundation for the Eurocentric culture of the West, gradually shifting from the core Indigenous values and culture. These so-called foreign agents had a significant contribution in changing the global outlook of the Indian subcontinent and the Northeastern states of India to a very great extent. “Ours is a generation that has seen the devastation of war” (Kire 25). The mother of the protagonist recalls the war days when everything was devastated, schools shut down, mass evacuations occurred, and families shattered. ‘Their family was part of the mass evacuation of people’ (Kire 27). Nixon in *Slow Violence and Environmentalism of the Poor* questions, “What would it mean to bring environmentalism into a full, productive dialogue with postcolonialism?” (12). Following Nixon's question, we can advance the discussion by integrating postcolonial ecocriticism into a conversation about the transformation of Indigenous communities' cultural identities in a given region. This would also mean talking about the lost heritage and culture not merely due to globalization or the advancement of communication technology but also because of the interference of outsiders who have imposed their customs and introduced newer forms of culture in the region. The change in approach to leading life comes due to various factors; one of them is the political factor, and the other is the sociological situation.

The novel *A Respectable Woman* not only structuralizes the change in the world (cultural, geographical, sociological, and natural) view after the war but also has ample reasons and situations to support that change. From a feminist perspective, the novel presents numerous instances that demonstrate a shift in society's perceived mindset. Kevinuo says, ‘I didn’t marry until fourteen years later. By then, everyone was convinced I was going to end up a spinster.’ (Kire 27). This mindset is more often witnessed in the interior regions of a nation, where it is considered best for a woman to get married and settle down; otherwise, society views her with suspicious eyes. The protagonist, Kevinuo, expresses that she had dreamed of becoming an independent woman for so long that she almost gave up everything else for the sake of higher education. “Becoming a working girl was one of the greatest joys of my life” (Kire 25). She further in the novel goes on to say that being an independent woman was the best feeling of her life.

Although this was not the society that Azuo, (Kevinuo’s mother) had lived in. It was only because of the propagation of missionaries and the Eurocentric ideas that the thought process of the entire society gradually changed. In contrast to Eurocentrism, the Indigenous thought process focuses primarily on preserving the prevalent customs and traditions; it incorporates all the liberal ideas that it can to safeguard the rights demanded by the upcoming generations. There can be several factors solidifying this mentality, as well as Azuo, the narrator’s mother recalls—

People were more broad-minded in our days. You might find that hard to believe, seeing as we dress in such an old-fashioned way. But it’s not about clothes. I guess people were more tolerant, more understanding and less quick to judge than they are today. (Kire 25)

Azuo (the narrator's mother) recalls that when she was young, their society was more tolerant because it was unaffected by external factors, unlike Kevinuo's younger years. She says, “War divides people” (Kire 31). These lines show how the mindset of people living in the area and thereby the culture of a place greatly gets affected by change in the social conditions. She explains that the thought process of a person who has survived a war is quite different from the one who hasn’t. The northeastern part of the country has witnessed a lot of cultural variations and traumatized situations, beginning with the Bhakti movement, followed by various reformist movements in the nineteenth century. Later, colonialism and the advent of Christian missionaries added to the already worsening situation of the traditional and cultural practices of the region. With every ‘other’ that came to overpower and superimpose their culture on the

natives, there came a significant amount of resistance, which led to the formation of newer cultural icons posing a threat to the already existing ones.

This novel, though, encapsulates several stories on the physical and the psychological front, but what becomes most evident in the entire story is how situations lead to changes in identity. This sudden flux of identities led to a crisis in the region, such as intertribal feuds, Naga men taking to drinking, domestic violence, women choosing education, deciding to remain unmarried, etc. The narrator questions, "But what's wrong with our culture that it can allow this kind of behavior? Why should we follow a culture that allows a man to be so cruel to his wife?" (Kire 41). The novel explains how, with the invasion of the army, things changed; people started living in fear; terms and conditions changed; in short, Eurocentric identities were imposed, and individuals lost their access to their old lifestyle. While it was thought that this would only make the conditions better, it worsened as controlling a community and its way of living was never the solution to making a so-called civilized world.

"Every memory is a story and every story tells so much about the society" (Kire 36). By doing this for generations, a community builds its own identity, one that is based on the lived experiences and is therefore quite different from the other society. The novel illuminates the rationale behind the adoption of this specific title, *A Respectable Woman*, for the novel and demonstrates how circumstances shape ideological formations. The shift from Indigenous to Eurocentric culture did not come in a day, nor without a valid reason. It came with valid reasons and situations that favoured it. And here we stand with the mutated culture, lost ethnicity, and some vague memories of the past.

Conclusion

It is exceptionally challenging to make people understand real history, the real story of their very own beginnings, when evidence is scarce or absent. The absence of tangible artifacts, written records, or oral traditions often leaves significant gaps in understanding, which are then filled by speculation, myths, or at times entirely biased narratives that are most of the time written by someone who is in power. This problem is made worse by cultural changes that happen over time because of intentional or unintentional influences, colonization, and the slow loss of native knowledge. Colonization, in particular, has been a powerful force in reshaping several historical narratives across the globe. Colonizing powers often imposed their interpretations of history, suppressing or erasing local narratives to justify their dominance and rewrite the identity of the colonized. Such erasures are most of the time planned acts of cultural domination that destroy evidence, languages, and traditional ways of life, taking people away from their authentic historical roots. For example, colonizers often destroyed temples, artifacts, and ancient texts, replacing them with monuments and accounts that glorified their conquests. The loss of evidence and cultural distortions also play a role in altering the perception of history. Societies often change their cultural practices and beliefs as they evolve, occasionally merging with or supplanting foreign influences. This blending, while creating new and dynamic cultures, can dilute or distort the original narratives. For instance, the impact of globalization has introduced homogenizing cultural elements that often marginalize indigenous histories and practices. Versions of the past, often made and propagated orally, fail to capture their complexity and authenticity.

Disseminating an accurate understanding of history can be extremely challenging due to the scarcity of evidence, the impact of colonization, and cultural shifts. This difficulty therefore calls for the importance of strong agencies that seek to find out and preserve marginalized voices, reconstruct lost narratives, and challenge dominant interpretations. It is also important to highlight the need for education systems that promote a clear, crisp, and authentic understanding of history, encouraging people to question sources, recognize biases, and appreciate the complexity of the past. Only by addressing these challenges can we hope to

reconstruct a more accurate and inclusive understanding of history. It is therefore high time that we find newer, better, and stronger ways to (re)think about our beginnings and bring out the lost but true narratives, cultures, and identities of lands and peoples over time.

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