

## DIGITIZING MEMORY AND IDENTITY IN EASTERINE KIRE'S *MARI*

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Vitsino Haikam<sup>1</sup>, Prof. Sivasish Biswas<sup>2</sup>,

Research Scholar & Supervisor,

Department of English, Assam University Diphu Campus, Karbi Anglong,  
Assam, India

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### Abstract

Easterine Kire's novel *Mari* serves as a profound literary artifact for preserving the cultural memory and identity of the Naga people against the erasures of colonialism and modernization. This paper argues that Kire's narrative strategies, which meticulously document oral histories, rituals, and the indigenous knowledge system of the Angami Naga community, perform a function analogous to digital archiving. By examining the novel as a form of pre-digital "memory storage," the analysis extends to a contemporary exploration of how such cultural content is configured, preserved, and potentially transformed within today's digital environments. The study investigates the tensions between the deep, embodied, and community-specific nature of cultural heritage as portrayed through *Mari*'s syncretic wisdom and the village's connection to the land and the flattening, democratizing, yet often de-contextualizing nature of digital platforms. It questions whether digitization acts as a vessel for robust cultural continuity or as a medium that inadvertently commodifies and dilutes heritage. Ultimately, this paper contends that while digital tools offer unprecedented opportunities for safeguarding and disseminating endangered cultures, Kire's work highlights the indispensable human element as the storyteller, the community, and the lived experience that must be central to any meaningful digital reconfiguration of memory and identity to prevent a loss of essence and authenticity.

**Keywords:** Cultural memory, digitization, identity, post colonialism.

### Introduction:

The relentless tide of globalization and modernity pose a significant threat to indigenous cultures worldwide, risking the erosion of unique languages, traditions, and knowledge systems. One way that literature, especially in postcolonial and indigenous contexts, has fought against the loss of cultural memory is by incorporating oral histories, myths, and communal activities into stories. *Mari* by Easterine Kire is a landmark in this canon, providing a "story of

Kohima and its people” (Kire xii). A careful archive, the novel preserves a way of life that teeters on the brink of change and tradition. We learn the digitization of cultural heritage by studying Kire’s literary mission of preservation. The paper examines Mar’s cultural memory, identity, and heritage as set up which later helps us understand the benefits and risks of bringing this personal, bodily knowledge into the digital world, where there are new ways, things can be mediated, easily accessed and distorted.

Easterine Kire is a pioneering voice from Nagaland who is widely recognized as the first Naga woman to publish a novel in English. Her works often reimagine the collective memory of the Nagas, blending storytelling with historical consciousness. In *Mari*, Kire powerfully documents the Battle of Kohima during World War II through the eyes of a young woman, offering both a personal and communal perspective on survival, resistance and cultural continuity. Mari’s story becomes a testimony for the Naga collective. Yet, when these memories are digitized, they are altered. The story is preserved, but context can be lost. Questions of ownership and authenticity arise. Indigenous histories risk being reduced to consumable products. Still, without digital circulation, many such voices would remain hidden. *Mari* therefore stands as both a survival narrative and a cultural artifact. It moves across oral, written, and digital forms, showing how memory continues to live and change.

### **Digitizing Memory and Identity in Easterine Kire’s *Mari*:**

Mari, the protagonist, transforms into a walking encyclopedia of the Nagas. Kire shows the world through rich, sensory details. The narrative presents practices such as the *genna* as “no-work days when it was taboo to work in the fields or woods” (5), basket-weaving and farming as meaningful traditions. It highlights their cultural value, the skill they require, and their deep connection to the land. Most importantly, we see Mari’s vast knowledge of edible herbs such as “gajo and gazie” (65) as a deep, almost spiritual wisdom passed down through generations. This is what is meant by “embodied knowledge.” Its knowledge that is lived, felt and practiced, not just memorized. As scholar Rongmei points out, Kire’s writing acts as a “bridge” (49), it takes traditions that were passed down orally and gives them a permanent home in the pages of her novel. This ensures that the traditional customs are not forgotten with time. In this way, the novel itself becomes a form of technology as a durable, powerful tool for memory. It captures the soul of a culture that was traditionally kept alive through spoken word and daily life, preserving it for future generations to experience and understand.

Digitization, therefore, is not just preservation; it acts as a revival beyond borders. However, this also brings challenges. Authenticity becomes questioned.

*Mari* is rooted in lived memory and community storytelling. Once turned into coded data, the story risks being flattened into just another war account, losing its cultural voice. Homi Bhabha asserts that postcolonial identity is already “unstable” and “hybrid” (56). The digital archive can deepen that instability by making *Mari*’s voice sound the same to all readers. Heritage too becomes complicated in digital environments. UNESCO defines intangible heritage as practices, expressions, and knowledge passed down within communities. *Mari*, as a literary artifact, carries intangible heritage such as oral traditions, collective trauma and cultural survival. When digitized, heritage is extracted from its original context and re-presented for global audiences. While this ensures visibility, it can also commodify cultural memory, reducing it to an object of consumption. Indigenous scholars have voiced concerns that digitization often privileges accessibility for outsiders while neglecting the community’s own modes of remembering (89). In the case of *Mari*, one must ask: who owns the memory once it circulates digitally—the Naga community, the author, or the platforms that host the text? Despite these concerns, the digital archive provides opportunities for reclaiming space. In postcolonial studies, archives have often been critiqued as colonial instruments of control, privileging certain voices while silencing others (35). By inserting *Mari* into digital repositories, Kire’s narrative unsettles this hierarchy. The novel not only records memory but also resists erasure by asserting indigenous presence in global platforms traditionally dominated by Western narratives. Thus, digitization here is both preservation and resistance.

*Mari* presents memory not as a static record but as a living, breathing presence. The protagonist Mari recounts the horrors of the Battle of Kohima, yet her voice embodies more than individual recollection. She represents the memory of a people whose histories are scattered, often orally transmitted, and rarely preserved in official archives. In this sense, Mari functions as what Marianne Hirsch terms “postmemory,” where individual recollections are intertwined with communal narratives that extend across generations (22). The novel stands as testimony, but testimony that becomes increasingly complex when transferred into digital forms. Reading *Mari* in print offers alinear engagement, while digital modes allow hyperlinked and fragmentary interactions. Scholars in digital humanities suggest that such reading practices reshape cognition and interpretation (78). For *Mari*, this means that the trauma of war, the ruptures of identity, and the rhythms of oral storytelling are experienced differently by digital readers. Some nuance may be lost, but new possibilities for layered interpretation also emerge. Digital annotations, hyperlinked historical documents, and online discussions surrounding *Mari* create a networked memory that extends beyond the text itself.

Kire portrays identity as an ongoing and multifaceted process, shaped simultaneously by oral traditions, written histories and the rise of digital technologies. Kire emphasizes that for the Nagas, identity is inseparable from collective memory, cultural practices, and geographical rootedness. However, when digitalized, this sense of self is often reframed through global algorithms, networks, and visual representations. While such platforms can portray strong connections and visibility, they also risk privileging outwardly appealing symbols such as warrior attire or festivals over the everyday practices of care, reciprocity and oral storytelling that truly sustain cultural identity. This shift reveals a central tension in postcolonial memory: heritage can become a curated and commodified display for a global audience, even as communities themselves strive to maintain it as a living, relational practice. Thus, identity in *Mari* is not static but constantly negotiated between the local and the global, the lived and the digitized, the remembered and the represented.

Furthermore, Kire's emphasis on orality presents a direct challenge to the textual and visual bias of most digital archives. The power of *Mari* lies in the rhythm and cadence of oral storytelling. Translating the essence of an oral tradition—the tone of the storyteller, the interactive nature of a community gathering, the pauses and inflections that carry meaning, into a digital format is immensely difficult. A scanned PDF of a text or even a video recording is a record *of* the performance, not the performance itself. The digital record can preserve the “what,” but it often struggles to capture the “how” and the “why”, the embodied experience that is central to the memory's meaning and its role in shaping identity. As Jerome de Groot observes, “The digital can seem to offer a complete archive, but it is always a translation, and with translation comes a necessary, and sometimes significant, loss” (89). Rather than positioning itself as an argument against digitization, the paper advocates for a call for a more mindful and ethical engagement—one that aligns with the values and practices exemplified in Kire's *Mari*. The primary objective of digitalization should be to serve and support the living community, not to create a replacement for it. The role of technology is to act as a tool that helps it continue grow and evolve. In this way, digitization moves beyond passive preservation and becomes a powerful means of active cultural transmission.

### **Conclusion:**

Easterine Kire's *Mari* ultimately suggests that true cultural sustainability lies in the continuous, intergenerational act of sharing and living the culture. Khrielievu O'Leary (Mari), Kire's mother's eldest sister narrating a story to Kire, and Kire later using that knowledge to heal, is the core mechanism of preservation.

Digital tools can be powerful allies in this mission, especially in an era of displacement and diaspora. They can connect generations, disseminate knowledge at scale, and create backups against cultural catastrophe. However, they must be employed with the understanding that they are tools, not replacements for the human relationships and lived experiences that generate and sustain identity.

Thus, *Mari* exemplifies how literature can preserve cultural memory and empower individuals to stand up for themselves despite obstacles from the past and present. We can see the digital preservation revolution in a new light by dissecting its complex arrangement of heritage. It serves as a timely reminder that digital spaces present both new opportunities for preserving legacy and new threats of commercialization, decontextualization, and oversimplification. Consequently, the values that *Mari* embodies, such as reverence for information and its inherent sanctity, recognition of knowledge's embeddedness in community and location, and a fundamental dedication to the continuation of culture through living rather than archival means, must inform the future of digital heritage. Rather than functioning as a repository, the digital archive should strive to become a nurturing space where cherished memories can thrive for future generations.

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