

## Raising the Dead: Reframing Public Memory in T. V. Eachara Varier's *Memoir Memories of a Father*

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### Abstract:

The proposed article aims to look at the political dimension of memoir writing where memory becomes a significant trope. Tracing Naxalism, an anti-state resistance discourse in India, with focus on the southern state of Kerala, an attempt is made to study the notorious 'Rajan incident' through the victim's own father T.V. Eachara Varier's memoir, *Memories of a Father* (2004). Arrested by the Kerala police on suspicious grounds for his alleged involvement in Naxalite activities, Rajan was found missing ever since and the memoir gives a traumatic account of a helpless father seeking justice. In fact, this notorious incident took place against the backdrop of the emergency in India, and the case of Rajan continues to haunt the conscience of society even today, raising the question of human rights.

Varier's counter-hegemonic mnemonic narrative poignantly documents the infiltration of personal memory into public domain. What are the strategies of encoding counter-memory by the memoirist? The absence/presence of Rajan, exacerbated by his 'missing' body has cut a deep social wound in the body politic of Kerala. Rajan's memorial which is described by the author, symbolises state oppression. Suffused with visual texts from the family albums of the departed soul, the hapless witness painfully chronicles the murky memories in a touching way. Thus, the paper seeks to analyze the politics of documenting memory through memoir writing and argues that the act of remembering certain incidents through different narratives has profound ideological undertones.

**Keywords:** memoir, memory, self, body, naxalism, state

### Introduction

"Raising the Dead: Reframing Public Memory in T. V. Eachara Varier's<sup>1</sup> memoir *Memories of a Father*" (2004) is an attempt to explore the interface between memoir and memory and see how personal memory is infiltrated into public domain with profound ideological implications. Reframing of public memory takes place as a result of ideological clashes and contestations. However, the memoirist adopts certain strategies to deconstruct the dominant, official memory by situating what we may call counter-memory which questions

and challenges the public memory. The Emergency in India and the suppression of the anti-state movement, Naxalism<sup>2</sup> in Kerala form the backdrop of studying Varier's memoir.

As a mode of inscribing lives, memoir can act as a powerful tool of political propaganda, apart from inscribing the memory surrounding a subject. Through this article, I intend to highlight the ideological dimension of the form memoir, by bringing out its political underpinnings. Obviously, memory is an indispensable trope in memoir writing and through this memoir on his dead son,<sup>3</sup> Eachara Varier is trying to 'raise the dead' from oblivion, to rethink the official public memory surrounding Rajan. Branded as a Naxalist by the state, he was arrested for anti-state activities but was later found missing. In fact, the notorious 'Rajan incident' dealt a luster blow to the prestige of Kerala state and its agencies. Thus, through this book, Varier archives the memory of his son. How or what are the strategies used by the memoirist in writing such a text is the focus of my article.

*Memories of a Father* is a paternal exposure of the brutal oppression of the state machine. In fact, by declaring the Emergency rather unexpectedly, Indira Gandhi, then Prime Minister of India was proclaiming a 'state of exception' where rule of law was transcended, basic human rights were mercilessly trampled down by unleashing "a governmental violence" (Agamben 87) for public good. Those shadowy forces like Naxalites who threatened the authority of state were targeted, many were detained in custody and obviously, Rajan who was a suspect (only a suspect without any proof of direct involvement) was not spared at all. However, those who were undemocratically held were bullied, tortured and mutilated by police forces inside separate spaces notoriously called 'camps.' Camps such as Kakkayam became a place where Naxalites were forced to confess their guilt for acting against state and its citizens. Here, Agamben's observation is important: "When the state of exception... becomes the rule, then the juridico-political system becomes a machine which may at any moment turn lethal" (86). He adds that violence is a part and parcel of the functioning of the state, particularly if there is a threat to it.

## Memoir and Memory

Originally, a term derived from the French word denoting memory, memoir is primarily based on memory (Couser 19) and it is "impressionistic and subjective rather than authoritatively fact based" (19). A memoir very often stems from the recollections and reminiscences of the author with whom the subject had affinity and familiarity (19). Memory is more often than not totally unreliable and memoir, an offshoot of an author's memory may be "fallible" and "fictive" (81). However, a memoirist does not have too much freedom to 'invent' facts as it may lead to distortion and controversies. Couser elaborates:

...the representation of the past necessarily requires some creativity on the part of the writer; few people have photographic memories, and even the most faithful memory does not provide a verbal transcription of events. Furthermore, as we've seen, memoir cannot comprise the whole of a life; narrative must always be highly selective. Any memoir is therefore necessarily at best a partial account of a life, in more ways than one. (81)

Maurice Halbwachs opines in the work *The Collective Memory* (1992) that memory is socially constructed and "while the collective memory endures and draws strength from its base in a coherent body of people, it is individuals as group members who remember"

(418). The different modes through which various societies remember their citizens and their achievements also involve “commemorative ceremonies and bodily practices” (Connerton 7), and such acts lead to the formation of what is called social memory “that is best termed the activity of historical reconstruction” (13). However, social memory is based on the assumption that memory is socially constructed particularly through social groups such as “kinship, religious and class affiliations that individuals are able to acquire, to localize and to recall their memories” (36). These social groupings pass on their collective memories across generations through various channels like narratives of grand parents, family histories, biographies, autobiographies, commemorative ceremonies and other ritual performances” (38). Public memory is not neutral but it has the tendency to be hegemonic and dominant obfuscating ‘other’ memories/memorials which are radical and deviant. Counter memorial narratives are rare but their presence in public places are usually erased.

What is the agenda of a memoirist? Memoir is a distinctive genre with its politics; “...the process of present remembering by his mature self...”(Couser134) is always selective. The selection from the archive of experiences is a difficult task and “erosion of memory” (131) is the result. In fact, the erosion takes place consciously or unconsciously. Conscious omission is a deliberate attempt to hide certain details which may sound incongruous or are in opposition with the agenda of a memoirist. Unconscious omission is generally a result of poor memory as plumbing the past to select a large number of distinctive experiences is almost an impossible task. However, “...the present tense is often used to narrate past action”(134). Memoirs immortalize the dead and they are meant to “..to memorialize actual human beings” (179). However, a memoir enacts a relationship with a person (180). In the case of *Memories of a Father*, a father recollects the memories of his son who went missing during the Emergency. It is also an expression of angst and protest against state oppression and human rights violation. State as an oppressing machine is interrogated through the text and is forced to confess guilt by appealing to divine justice.

## **Emergency in India:**

### **Rajan Incident**

The Emergency had a profound impact on Indian social life and with the absence of freedom, there was censorship of not only press but also freedom of expression. Fortunately, that dark episode under Indira Gandhi came to an end on February 22, 1977, putting a welcome end to a period of torture and public humiliation. In his memoir, Varier opines: “The most inhuman aspect of the Emergency was that the two major human rights, the right to life and the right to know, were totally denied. The tragedy of my son was typical of this denial of rights”(61). In the midst of his narrative, the ailing father gets emotional and comments: “History doesn’t pardon a lack of reaction and laziness often. I fought a lonely battle for my lost son. Though tired, I am still carrying on (63).

The notorious ‘Rajan incident’ is regarded as the aftermath of Kayana police station attack case. P. Rajan, an engineering student of Kozhikode Regional Engineering College was arrested in 1976, March 1 for his alleged involvement in Naxalite activities. He had been the best singer of the Kozhikode university Youth festival and though he was not directly involved in the movement, “he was only a sympathiser. That would have been the

truth...he was so weak in mind that he would not even have been able to think of that” (70), argued Varier.

### **Naxalism as Resistance**

Naxalism, an anti-state discourse has not more than 50 years of history in the Indian political scenario. Doubtless is the fact that it had a profound impact on the society of Kerala, representing all sections of society irrespective of class, caste and gender. In fact, Naxalism in Kerala may be classified into three significant phases. The first phase started with Kunnikkal Narayanan who was influenced by Mao's<sup>4</sup> literature and ends with Vellathuval Stephen's arrest. In fact, this period (1967-1971), Thalassery-Pulpalli riot broke out and brutal state oppression ensued. The second phase started immediately before the declaration of emergency and we may consider it as a period of regrouping. A period of far-reaching socio-political changes in the political history of Kerala, this tumultuous period came to an end by 1992. However, this period witnessed the eventful history of CPI (ML) party under K. Venu from 1971-1992. Later, we witnessed the slow and steady growth of Naxalite movement and the formation of Maoism.

Varier, the narrator is a character and helpless witness to all the unfortunate incidents; he may be called an “inside narrator” (57) as put down by Couser. However, it is important to analyze some of the strategies of documenting memory adopted by Eachara Varier in *Memories of a Father*.

### **Authorship and Agency**

*Memories of a Father* is unfolded before the readers through the voice of the subject, Rajan's father, Eachara Varier and one can see it as an accusatory thesis, a counter-discourse directed against state and its machinery. The traumatic self of an old father finds the form, memoir to ventilate his anger and protest against the power structure. However, the knowledge or rather discourse constructed through Varier's narrative is powerful enough to reshape the official version of history popularised by the state. In fact, the authorial voice implicates the state authority for the brutal act of exterminating Rajan. However, the memoirist's narrative has the weight of authenticity and he puts state on trial through his narrative, by speaking justice; perhaps even by knowing the fact that he was fighting a losing battle, Varier craves more of a divine justice. He directs an unpleasant question to the society: “...I leave a question to the world: why are you making my innocent child stand in the rain even after his death?” (74). He adds further:

Only those who have gone through such misery understand the agony of parents who must drag themselves through life without getting information about a missing child. For me it was like a pin being constantly inserted into my body. If I thought of my son while eating I found it difficult to continue. When I slept memories of him would surround me. My inner self was always writing, as if on a red-hot tin sheet. All my dear ones blamed me for not finding Rajan and our home became a disturbing place in his

### **Politics of the Body**

The absence/presence of Rajan's body in the public domain has generated a flurry of discourses and counter-discourses. The body of the 'missing' subject evokes memory and the construction of public memory becomes a political act where making and unmaking of mnemonic discourses take place simultaneously. When Rajan becomes a threat to state through his alleged involvement in Naxalite activities, he was captured, body was tortured and later was found missing after his death. The wound inflicted by the repressive state apparatus on his body became a festering wound on the body politic of the state of Kerala. The dead person's spirit started haunting the conscience of the society and writing such a memoir turns out to be a highly political act. Rajan was allegedly implicated in the Kayanna police station attack by the extremists and the resultant police action took place. Brutal police torture was a method of police enquiry and one Jayaram Padikkal in charge of the camp<sup>5</sup> at Kakkayam. Varier recounts the brutality of the violence in the camp through his words:

I don't know whether I will be strong enough to describe the torture that my son underwent at the Kakkayam camp. Like the torture at Hitler's concentration camps, what went on at Kakkayam was an experiment, undemocratic and heartless, to find out whether the intellectual honesty and sense of justice of a generation could be destroyed by the power of an iron fist...(22).

### Temporality and History

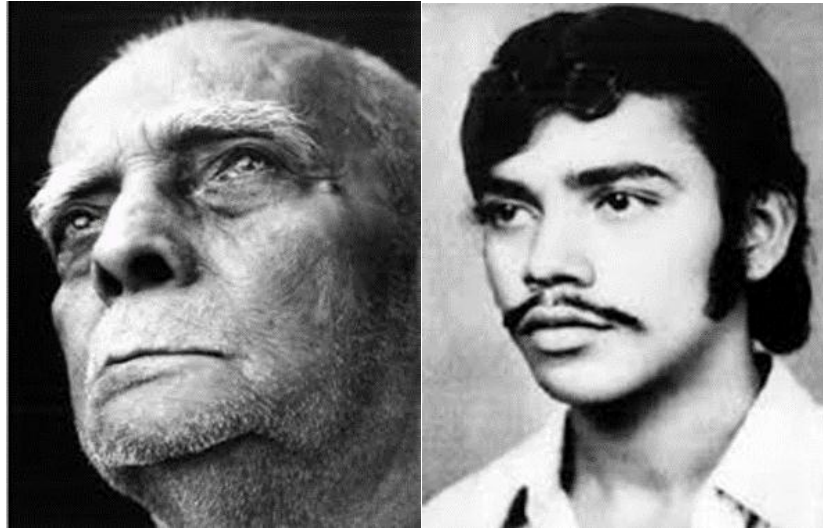
Echara Varier's narrative recaptures a poignant time - frame in the history of India, particularly Kerala; the brutalities of the Emergency is laid bare to the readers evoking a sense of guilt, helplessness and self-doubt. The memoirist's politics of rehistoricizing the historical moment is capable of sending jitters in the minds of the present generation who are more often than not exposed to the malicious state surveillance into their private lives, exacerbated with many an instance of human rights violations all over. Rethinking such an abhorrent episode in Kerala history is tantamount to reframing its official version of history by justifying all such nefarious actions of state under the pretext of safeguarding its solemn goal of preserving the sacred values enshrined in the constitution. In short, the memoir attains the position of a counter-text which questions the establishment and its machinery in a blunt and unequivocal manner. Varier is blunt in questioning the establishment in the following words:

I want to deal with the judicial system of India as I go on talking about my son. The sane old dictum of the Indian judiciary is that even if thousands of culprits escape, not even a single innocent person should be punished. He fathers of our judicial system were that particular that no innocent person should be punished wrongly. But today our enquiry officers never care a damn whether the real culprits or the innocent are the ones punished (23).

### Family and Identity

An appendix is added to the memoir in the form of photographs culled from the narrator's family album. However, it throws much light on the background of the subject, Rajan, his parents and siblings and evokes myriad shades of his personality - as an actor, singer and an engineering student. These visual narratives offer slices of history, where memory is crystallised and archived for inquisitive future generations.





**T. V. Eachara Varier and P. Rajan**

Photography is unique in the sense that it obviously generates an “illusion of continuity over time and space” (Hirsch xi). As a matter of fact, they capture intimate aspects of life, particularly centred on family identity (7); a family’s continuity is sustained through the collectivity of photographic texts, the family album. Susan Sontag in *On Photography*, elaborates further: “...photography came along to memorialize, to restate symbolically, the imperilled continuity and vanishing extendedness of family life. Those ghostly traces, photographs, supply the token presence of the dispersed relatives. A family’s photograph album is generally about the extended family – and, often, is all that remains of it” (6). Barthes calls photographs as “the only material traces of an irrecoverable past, derive their power and their important cultural role from their embeddedness in the fundamental rites of family life...” (Hirsch 5). Such images “give people an imaginary possession of a past...” (Sontag 6), providing nostalgia. Family memory is brought back in the present. Photographs remind us of the past, and obviously they bring back those who are dead and Sontag rightly calls photography “an elegiac art” (11), evoking a sense of loss and pathos. She argues: “...all photographs are *memento mori*. To take a photograph is to participate in another person’s (or thing’s) mortality, vulnerability, mutability. Precisely by slicing out this moment and freezing it, all photographs testify to time’s relentless melt” (11). Photographs provide valuable evidence for the future. In *Camera Lucida*, Barthes comments on this aspect: “...The important thing is that the photograph possesses an evidential force, and that its testimony bears not on the object but on time. From a phenomenological viewpoint, in the photograph, the power of authentication exceeds the power of representation” (88-89).

### **Memorializing the Dead**

The decision to construct a memorial for Rajan may be a fitting tribute to his memory and it appeared in the form of a hospital ward in the General hospital at Kochi, Kerala. Varier writes: “...a “critical care ward” was built. This is still the only ward in the general hospital where the beds are not empty; it is always crowded with patients” (58). Surpassing several hurdles both legal and financial, it ultimately turned out to be a reality, a grim reminder of

the atrocities during the dark period of emergency in India, Kerala. Exposed to public scrutiny, the memorial acts as a signifier with profound emotional ramifications. The memorial stone with its inscription is a grim reminder of the human rights violations perpetrated by the state and its machinery. However, the underpinning politics behind memorialisation may not be easily overlooked; the aim obviously is to immortalise the 'dead' in the public memory.

### **'Eloquent' Evidences**

*Memoirs of a Father* is a textual odyssey of a hapless father in search of his 'missing' son, Rajan who was implicated as a Naxalist. The subject who was arrested in connection with a police station attack<sup>6</sup> was tortured in a camp, disappears from the scene and the state disowns the responsibility of custodial death. The memoirist observes: "...they packed Rajan's body into a sack and took it away in a jeep. They burned it in the midst of some forest with sugar, to ensure that not even the bones would be left behind, so it was said" (68). His body was not recovered and its absence/presence opens an array of conspiracy theories which continue to be circulated in the public domain of Kerala. The body was destroyed by the agents of the state out of fear of exposure, leaving no trace as evidence, piling lies upon lies to avoid embarrassment before the public. Varier acts as an enquirer and investigator trying to expose the callousness of the power machine before the conscience of society. However, the memoir performs the function of an 'evidence,' a sharp indictment against the state for insensitively obfuscating the traces of a citizen; even the state of his being alive or not itself is obdurately silenced. Witnesses are quoted as evidences to corroborate the argument by the memoirist that his son was a he receiving end. Koru, Benhar and Chathamangalam Rajan narrated "stories of blood clotting torture" (66) to Varier enough without his asking. Eachara Varier vs. the Government of Kerala was filed through advocate Ram Kumar on February 25, 1977. Later, the Supreme Court found the affidavit filed by the accused false and asked the government to produce Rajan in court; action was recommended against the accused police officers.

### **Conclusion**

*Memories of a Father* reframes the political history of Kerala by bringing out the trauma of a dark episode; dominant memory which is circulated through umpteen documents is thus, subverted giving way to an alternative angle of armed revolution. The event is relived and the readers find it a painful experience in reading the narrative asking so many questions to themselves. As Basil Fernando opines in the 'Foreword' to the book: "This is a story for our times. It should be read carefully by anyone concerned about the real meaning of human rights..."(VIII). In a tone of protest and anger, the memoir acts as polemical political document implicating the state and its agencies. Resistance is heard loud and clear. Interesting is the fact that the book was not banned at all; on the other hand it became a piece of commemoration during this "age of commemoration" (Nora 181). Apart from being a tribute to his son Rajan, Varier's memoir is also a book of mourning, an elegy on the victims of the Emergency in India. Writing becomes a performative act, an act of recovering the memory which was submerged in the political realm.

'Raising the dead' has a symbolic dimension; by writing a memoir the father was doing an act of retrieving his son's memory. No wonder, through his memoir, Varier has

raised his voice against the system which victimised his family. Through *Memories of a Father*, the memoirist has raised a fitting monument for his departed son. To conclude, it is a eulogic document “with moral imperatives whose very endurance could guarantee memory” (Kendall 250). Though one may accuse Varier for his ‘utopian vision,’ the author’s agenda was to unravel the politics of lies, by appealing to the conscience of society:

I became convinced that the search would never end, sure that a father’s journey in search of his son is more tiring than the journey of a son in search of his father. Many friends stood wholeheartedly by me, but I was lonelier day after day. I walked up the empty inner rooms of my memory....(13)

### Notes

1. T.V. Eachara Varier (1920–2006) was a professor of Hindi from Thrissur district in the south Indian state of Kerala. He became a popular figure in connection with his life long legal battle against the Congress government to unravel the reasons behind the disappearance of his only son, P. Rajan during the Emergency. After the Emergency, Varier filed a *habeas corpus* writ petition in the Kerala High Court seeking its intervention to produce his son. No wonder, it turned out to be a historic struggle against human rights violations and was well-documented everywhere.
2. Naxalism, a violent movement sprang up in Kerala inspired by the events which broke out at Naxalbari under the leadership of Charu Majumdar and Kanu Sanyal in the West Bengal state of India. Naxals were communist revolutionaries who aimed at bringing social change through revolutionary means. However, naxalism failed to take root in Kerala after attacks such as Pulpally in Wynad, Kuttiyadi and Thirunelly in Kerala. Charu Majumdar, regarded as the father of naxalism in India led the Naxalbari uprising in 1968. A member of the Communist Party of India (Marxist), he later broke away from it and founded the Communist Party of India (Marxist-Leninist) in 1969. Majumdar was killed in the lock-up in 1972. Kanu Sanyal (1932-2010) was an Indian communist. He was one of the leaders under whom the Naxalbari uprising took place. He was committing suicide in 2010. Kunikkal Ajitha had been an active participant in the Naxalite movements in Kerala in the 1960s and participated in operations such as armed raids in Thalassery and Pulpally police stations. She was arrested and imprisoned for 9 years. After her jail term, Ajitha parted ways with the armed struggle and is now active as a human rights activist, fighting for the cause of women through her organisation *Anweshi*. Mandakini Narayanan or Ma was a Naxalite leader in Kerala who passed away in 2005. Originally belonging to Gujarat, she married Kunikkal Narayanan, one of the prominent naxal leader in Kerala. Ajitha was their daughter.
3. On March 1, 1976, P. Rajan, 21, a final year student of the Calicut Engineering College, Thrissur, Kerala, was whisked away from the hostel in the early hours along with another student, Joseph Chali. Immediately after the arrest, the Principal informed Rajan's father, T.V. Eachara Warrior of his son's arrest. Evidences collected from eight witnesses confirmed that from the hostel, Rajan had been taken to a secluded bungalow, where he was tortured by six police-men. But, as per official records, Rajan was not arrested. The judge ordered that the boy should be produced before the court but the government failed because Rajan had already been tortured to



death. Subsequently, K. Karunakaran, then Chief Minister had to resign. Rajan's memory is sustained in public domain through various narratives of popular culture. *Piravi*, the 1988 Malayalam film directed by Shaji N. Karun had the plot based on the notorious Rajan incident. The All Kerala Rajan Memorial music competition was launched in the National Institute of Technology, Kozhikode to commemorate Rajan's life. 'Rajam,' a cultural fest is held in the university since 1987 in memory of Rajan.

4. Maoism is a political doctrine inspired by the teachings of the Chinese leader Mao Zedong who proposed permanent revolution by peasants as a solution to all social evils. Mao also stood for the promotion of small-scale industry and agriculture.
5. *Uruttal* was a peculiar torturing method adopted by the police inside the camps during the Emergency. In Kerala, Naxalites and their sympathisers were beaten up, then tied to a wooden bunch "with their hands and legs down. A heavy wooden roller would be rolled over their thighs; many could not stand the pain, and fell unconscious. To prevent them from crying out, the police pushed cloth into their mouths"(66-67). Rajan was probably killed during this practice and his body was destroyed beyond recovery.
6. The Pulpally attack was conducted in support of migrant farmers who had illegally occupied the forest land of about 20,000 acres owned by Devaswom and were cultivating there for years. The police who stationed there were targeted by the naxalites. It was to support the poor beedi workers of Kannur district, Kerala that the Thalassery attack took place.

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