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A Feminist Reading of Easterine Kire's *Mari*

Tarulata Pegu

Research Scholar, Assam University, Assam, India

Email: tarulatapegu18@gmail.com

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ABSTRACT

The representations of women in literature are biased and are appropriated by men. This led the writers of the feminist tradition to find out the cause of their secondary position in society. Inequalities between the sexes are not new in human history. In this respect, the North East women writers have their unique contribution to the progress and emancipation of women. Easterine Kire is one among such writers who were not behind to share the experiences of tribal women of her Naga community. This is what exactly Kire has done in her thought-provoking novel *Mari* (2010). It recounts the story of her aunt Mari during World War II. The war has crafted a newly emancipated woman out of her. The study attempts to examine the work from feminist perspectives. The study will highlight how despite all the adversities and difficulties Mari rose above her situations and like a true feminist she decides to pursue her dream and become an independent individual with her philosophies of life.

1. Objectives:

1. To examine how the war and violence have swallowed up the people of the Naga community.
2. To analyse how the people had survived the war
3. To examine how Mari was caught in both love and horror amidst the war.
4. To explore how Mari dealt with her hardships.
5. To interpret how Mari redefines herself as an emancipated being.

2. Review of Literature

The review of the literature for this study has been carried out by analysing important journals and scholarly articles related to the novel *Mari*. Through a careful examination of the available resources, it can be said that the novel has

been approached from various perspectives like historical, romantic, violence, war, and identity but there is less number of work concerning the feminist perspective. Some of these articles are elaborated on below.

Many works are carried out from the perspectives of History. The novel is popular for its historical elements. K B VieoPou examines the native perspectives of the war and its history and memory along with dealing with the story of Mari.

Dr. Dayananda Pathak and Aghatoli Sema in their jointly published work "Portraying the Contemporary Spirit of War and Violence in Easterine Kire's *Mari*", interprets how Mari can redefine herself once she was exposed to the violence of the war. The question of identity has been one of the motives of the study. Again, Professor Biswas and Siambiakmawi also attempted to study the novel from the identity perspectives in their work "Being *Mari*: Identity and Becoming in Easterine Kire's *Mari*".

Gargi Gupta in "War and love in Kohima", narrates about the romantic aspect of the novel along with the Second World War and its effect on them. She explores the different aspects of love in Mari's life. *The Hindustan Times* also describes the novel as "...a gentle love story set in the midst of violence- the violence of a forgotten battle for Kohima".

Thus, the study under consideration found a new angle to look at the work from feminist perspectives.

Analysis

Over the years the main purpose of female writings is to bring an end to the battle between the sexes. Inequalities between the sexes are not new in human history. The representations of women are biased and are appropriated by men. This led the writers of the feminist tradition to find out their secondary position in society. Mary Wollstonecraft in her influential work "A Vindication of the Rights of Woman" (1792), came forward to urge for an equal right for women and urges for their emancipation. However, J.S. Mill, a notable male writer, argued for the inequalities between the sexes in his essay "The Subjection of Women"(1869) that can not be ignored. Together they can be considered as a pioneer who voiced for the cause of women.

This exploration opened up new scope for the female discourses. They highlight how women writers initially only imitated male writings. They soon realized that they were debarred of equal opportunities and hence they protested against such disadvantages. Women writers began to develop their writing style and themes that revolve around women's issues. These writings also focus on the women 'self' placed amidst different social, political, cultural, and economic conditions. The feminist theory evolved from its three waves. To give a passing introduction, the first wave focuses on women suffragettes and it occurred during the nineteenth and the twentieth century. Whereas the second

wave which reaches its height during the 1960s and 1970s focuses mainly on women's liberation movement for other social and legal rights. The third wave can be called a continuation, addition, and reaction to second-wave feminism.

As mentioned, in literature women were represented as inferior beings. Thus the feminists set forward to bring out their consciousness and came forward to share their experiences and sentiments so that societies look them through new eyes. Apart from Wollstonecraft, others like Jane Austen, Bronte Sisters, George Eliot, etc, to name only a few came forward to dispel the earlier notion against women. And authors and critics like Virginia Woolf, Julia Kristeva, Elaine Showalter, etc. in the twentieth century continued their work for women's rights.

In this regard, the North East women writers have their unique contribution to the progress and emancipation of women. Easterine Kire is one among such writers who were not behind to share the experiences of tribal women mainly of the Naga community. This is what exactly Kire has done in her thought-provoking novel *Mari* (2010). The story is set against the backdrop of the Second World War. In the plotline, Kire has recounted the real story of her aunt Mari or Khrielievu O' Leary. However, as Kire says it is not only her story but the history of the Naga community who were exposed to the Japanese invasion of their land, mainly Kohima and adjoining areas, in the 1944 World War. It left a deep impact on the psyche of the people along with ravaging their land and property.

"...I had been changed by the war, never to be the same again" (Kire 104).

Mari and other people of Nagaland were caught in the fiercest fighting during the Second World War being a part of India. Kohima and the surrounding areas were affected in a worse manner from April to June 1994. The town was destroyed and bombed during the war and was renovated only after the Allied forces had victory over the Japanese invasion and finally led the latter's retreat from the northern Angami villages and the east of Kohima. The destruction was heavy on both sides as the British and Indian Army lost around 4000 men and the Japanese lost around 5000 men within a short time.

Although the war lasted a short period in the area it had a huge impact on the lives of those communities living there. Initially, they had a glimpse of the war-affected people when refugees from Burma came starving and disease-ridden. The main character Mari around whom the story revolves narrates how the war had changed her life altogether. She no longer had her carefree and innocent life. Unlike others, her mother believed that it is more important for young girls to be educated and acquire different skills than marrying off at an early age. This is how she taught her daughters. But to her aunt educating girls seems a wastage of time. In the very initial pages Mari opines that "In the Naga culture, the woman's role was to look after the house and children and nothing beyond that" (Kire 6).

She disliked the abiding rules that she had to face from an early age. When the Japanese were preparing to invade India, the grown-up girls went away to join the military nursing service. Mari also wished to do the same but she was underage to go. Her neighbor and friend Jimmy were two years younger than her, but he also talks about leaving home for Tiddim. Right from an early age, she had an awareness of the inequalities between the sexes. She was secretly envious of Jimmy's liberty as she expresses, "I envied his liberty. It was impossible for us girls to do anything adventurous, as our parents were very protective of us." (Kire19). However, she played her part as a supervisor to a road construction work. She was able to do this only after seeking the proper permission of her father. She also runs a little garment shop with her brother. This portrays her active participation outside the home.

At the age of seventeen, amidst the approaching war, Mari met Victor at her construction site. Victor was a white soldier who was posted in Kohima for the upcoming war. She was dearly admired by Sergeant Victor and wants to come to her home for her. However, Mari was worried about the reaction of his parents. Her father was a stern man who was feared and respected. His decision was supreme in the house. It was decided by her parents whom they make friends with. But Mari had a step to go forward and approach her parents for the approval of her relationship with Victor. Finally, Victor mingled easily into the family and became a member. He came to live in the home and took the responsibility of the house when her father went away to Shillong. They were accepted as a married couple. But Victor promised her a wedding only after the end of the war. Mari and Victor were deeply in love with each other. Her name 'Marigold' was given to her by Victor. However, they had to part their ways during the war and their little world of happiness collapsed.

With the war at hand, death and destruction lingered over the lives of the characters. Shops and schools were closed down. Women were molested and people abandoned their houses. The constant gunfire and sirens made it impossible to stay in the town. Mari along with her younger sisters was taken to their uncle's village in Chieswema by Victor. And he left them soon as he had to fight against the Japanese invaders.

Their stay in the village was short-lived as it was invaded by the Japanese. Mari had her first encounter with the Japanese soldiers in the same village. The educated Naga boys were vulnerable as they were caught and made spies for them. Equally vulnerable were the girls as they were picked up as and when they please. Even Mari and her sisters wore Angami waist-cloths and apply charcoal all over their bodies to not draw the attention of the enemy soldiers. They looted the village and above all life became dangerous amidst those soldiers. So like others, Mari and her sister left the village for the unseen future into the Tsiekhou woods. Mari felt lonely and helpless as she was responsible for her younger sisters. Her father was ordered to leave for Shillong carrying important official documents just before the war started. While her mother could not be persuaded to join them as she was unwilling to leave behind her

aged parents in Kohima. Mari was much worried about her mother as the town was by then filled up with thick smokes. To her great relief, her brother visited them in the forest. Life grew threatening in the jungles too as they were hovered around by wild animals like Tiger. So they moved to Chuzie to an isolated place where they met a woman with her three children. They had their second encounter with the Japanese soldier there. By now Mari was aware that she had to disguise herself as one of the village women. She and her sister Zhabu, each took one child from the woman and seated them on their laps when the Japanese soldiers arrived in the hut. This saved them. Being the eldest sister Mari wished she could take her sisters to some safe place away from death, suffering, and starvation.

They were compelled to move from place to place as they were hungry and they had nothing to eat. This was a common problem for all the people during the war. There were no animals or even herbs to eat and the constant bombings devastated their paddy fields. Mari and her sisters were almost starving to death. They became very weak due to a lack of food and shelter. Mari misses Victor and her parents and badly wanted her normal days back. Mentally, they were tired and lonely but the tint of hope that they will be reunited with their loved ones kept them moving. Zhabu was almost abducted when she sets forth for the village in search of food. But she was brave enough to escape by biting at the shoulder of a Japanese soldier. After a long struggle in jungles, trenches, and camps amidst bullets, rockets, and mines everywhere they managed to escape to Shillong where their father welcomed them.

The war had taken much from Mari and it changed her life altogether. She learned that just before the day the war was declared an end after the retreat of the Japanese soldier, Victor died while fighting the enemies. This was unbearable for Mari. It left a deep hallow in her existence. She overcame her grief partially after she discovered that she was pregnant with Victor's child. It gave her a new purpose of existence. She was encouraged by her mother with her sweet words:

We have lost a precious person but now another one is going to fill the empty place in our hearts. Be brave, eat, and try to strengthen yourself. (Kire100).

Her new gain strength is seen in the way she went to Victor's grave and did not shed many tears. She attempts to understand the meanings of life in a better way as she says, "I decided then to live, not pine away".(Kire 102) Thus, after the birth of her baby, she looked after her wholeheartedly and promised to be a mother and a father to the baby.

Her attitude to treat life easily can be seen in the way she readily accepts her second love. She was pleased that her new lover Dickie, who was also a soldier posted newly in Kohima, loved her dearly. As he was much younger than Victor, Mari had a feeling that a younger Victor has come back to her. However, her parents did not like to give their consent to seeing his young age. But she did not wait much for the approval of her parents. She had harsh words

with her parents regarding this. This partly shows her wish to dismantle the barriers in her life. She reciprocated her love only after being sure that she was not merely Dickie's 'passing fancy' (Kire 120). But this relationship turned out to be a failure as Dickie could not marry her. He went back to England when orders came for the British troops to withdraw from India. She had a child named Lily from him out of wedlock. Though she was not ashamed of having her, it was hard on her parents. They did not like her to have a child without marriage. Also, Sam, her brother, and her father were so protective of her that they did not want to send their daughters to England as she was only eighteen years old and quite a stranger to the outside world.

Mari's dream to establish a new home with Dickie remained unfulfilled mainly due to the authoritarian figure, Mr. Pawsey, who was the district commission of Kohima under the British government. He would not allow the soldiers to take back their family to England.

Situations like these were preparing her to become a strong lady. It can be seen that after some years, being a mother of two, she sets forward to fulfill her long lost dream of becoming a nurse. She made many sacrifices and work hard for four consecutive years away from home in Ludhiana, except for a few occasional home visits. Then she went to Delhi for a one-year course in obstetrics. By this time she has learned enough skills and was much happier in her life. This made her an emancipated being. Finally, she made herself capable of supporting her daughters.

She became independent when she got a job in Digboi Assam Oil Company as a senior staff nurse. She was earning enough so that she could bring her daughters to live with her. Meanwhile, she met her life partner Patrick O' Leary. Considering her second failure in love she was quite unprepared for Patrick's proposal. However, seeing his gentleness and love for her she had to accept him. Before she thought of herself, she thought about her daughters and thus she made sure that Patrick loves them just like a father. This time Mari also waited for the consent of her parents as she did not like to offend them. She was extremely happy when she received a positive response to her marriage with Patrick. She thought it was important that all the major decisions of her life should include their approval.

She grabs her chance to be happy again. She was overwhelmed when she could support and help her parents and sister in the time of need. Kohima once again became a battlefield when another conflict took place between the Indian Army and the Naga Agitators who were demanding independence from India. Mari felt so thankful for having the job. Also, she could educate her daughters in the best possible manner. And eventually being a woman, a mother, she was with the choices of her daughters.

Thus, she was happily married and later left her job to be together with Patrick and finally retired into their dream home in Kohima. She had handled the problems of her life quite well. It was only after the death of her mother she

realized that it was her mother who kept the house together. But like most of the families, her father became an important figure in deciding the family matters. Mari was inspired and motivated to be a strong human being by her mother. The war had also crafted a new emancipated human being out of her. It taught her to be an independent and brave lady and to look at life from different perspectives. She dared to have a child outside of marriage during a time when such things were unaccepted by society. She chooses to love outside her community. She also retained her individuality by not going away with Dickie to the unseen foreign land forever. In a way, she showed her love for her parents and her people above all. So, like a true feminist she stands up for her happiness and had more or less a peaceful and satisfying life in the end.

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