

# Voices From The Edge: A Subaltern Reading Of Easterine Kire's Mari

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The term 'Subaltern', first coined by Antonio Gramsci, refers to the oppressed and marginalised group of people, who are denied their socio-cultural rights and identity. Currently, under the impact of Marxism, postcolonialism and feminism, subaltern has come to signify broadly the subordination in social, political, religious and economic spheres and hierarchies. The researcher in this article tries to bring out the subaltern struggles faced by the marginalised characters in Easterine Kire's *Mari*. Easterine Kire, winner of the Hindu Prize for fiction is a prolific Naga writer of the Angami Naga tribe. Kire, in her novel *Mari* focusses on the forgotten battle that took place in Nagaland, which changed the geography and lifestyle of the people of this region. Through this novel, Kire has attempted to give a voice to the marginalised group, who inspite of their selfless service were not given any acknowledgement or appreciation in the mainstream society. The present article brings into limelight the suppressed voices of the subalterns of Kohima, whose lives were ravaged by war.

**Keywords:** Subaltern, Hierarchy, War, Voice, Marginalisation.

## INTRODUCTION

The term 'subaltern' represents the suppression and oppression of the marginalised people. It distinguishes and depicts the group of people, the men and women who are sociologically and politically oppressed by the hegemonic structure of the society. In the 1970s, the term subaltern rightly represented the colonised people of the South Asian continent, and in the 1980s, it is employed by the Subaltern Studies group in India to decode the histories of the marginalised groups. It is an attempt to read history from below; from the perspectives of the common people. Great thinkers like Gayatri Spivak, Antonio Gramsci and Ranajit Guha can be considered the predecessors of subaltern studies.

The term "subaltern" is first used by the Italian Marxist thinker Antonio Gramsci, and it signifies the people in the periphery, especially the peasants, women, children and other underprivileged sections of the society. Gramsci defines the term subaltern in his seminal book, *Selections from the Prison Notebooks* as "the formations which the subaltern groups themselves produce, in order to press claims of a limited and partial character... those new

formations which assert the autonomy of the subaltern groups, but within the old framework” (52). According to him, these oppressed groups must be examined through the lens of their own cultural and societal structures. In Guha’s point of view, the term refers to “the general attribute of subordination in South Asian Society whether this is expressed in terms of class, caste, age, gender and office or in other way” (qtd. in Gopal 142).

The subaltern theory centres on the marginalised sections of society who have no voice because of the socially constructed discrimination based on race, class and gender. Under this paradigm comes the category of women who are also refused an acceptable space in society. It is through their writings that women strive to reclaim their rightful space and individuality in society. Gayatri Spivak, in her ground-breaking essay “Can the Subaltern Speak?” illustrates the condition of women who are denied a voice due to their status as gendered subalterns. She examines the marginalised, the working-class women and other positions of the subaltern. Spivak rightly calls a subaltern “a person without lines of social mobility” (Spivak 28).

Easterine Kire, the Northeast Indian writer, has successfully voiced her concerns for the marginalised group who have been muted and unheard for centuries. In a postcolonial context, Kire creates her identity as a voice of the subaltern people. Her novels can be seen as an outlet for her voiceless characters. Being a writer of the voiceless, Kire does not fail to echo the problems of the subaltern in the Indian context. As a postcolonial writer of realities, she identifies the problems of the subalternity of her characters and raises her voice for their identity in society through her writings. The present article aims to bring out the suppressed voices in Kire’s text *Mari*, who, despite their selfless service, were not given any acknowledgement or appreciation by the mainstream society.

Kire’s novel *Mari* portrays the unsaid history of the Northeast region. The novel revives the memory of a forgotten battle that took place in Nagaland, which changed the geography and lifestyle of the people of this region. Through her storytelling, Kire captures the essence of a bygone time in a neglected land, torn apart by conflict before the world acknowledged its existence. The decisive battle of the early 1940s left an indelible mark on the entire generation. Kohima, Nagaland’s capital, sacrificed its entire land as the field for the devastating World War II. The sacrifice of the Nagas for the British forces to evacuate the Japanese invasion lasts forever in the hearts of the tribal community. Kire, through this novel, has made an effort to give her voice to the unheard who, despite their selfless service, are refused any acknowledgement or appreciation in the mainstream society. The novel *Mari*, which pictures the real Battle of Kohima (1944) and which ended the Japanese westward advancement during World War II, is one of the master pieces of Kire.

The battle of Kohima is referred to as the ‘Forgotten Battle’ and its warriors the ‘Forgotten Heroes’. The history of the Battle of Kohima highlights the stark realities of what war can do to the peaceful and beautiful little village and its people. The innocent civilians with very little knowledge of war were mercilessly forced to suffer, and Kire’s protagonist is her aunt *Mari*, who acts as an envoy by detailing the emotional turbulence and displacement that war has brought to people’s minds:

We all felt terribly lonely and the beautiful golden sunset made me even more miserable. The whining of plane engines overheard, the incessant sound of shelling, these were the sounds that had become a part of our lives now. If there was a lull in the firing, we would all stop working and strain our ears, waiting anxiously for it to begin again. The shelling felt normal to us, the silence abnormal. (73)

The gloominess of life during war is disclosed when Mari says, “I felt nauseated at the sight of fresh blood on wounded men, their bandages soaked through. We had seen much in such little time” (81).

At the heart of the novel is Mari O’ Lungo, a young Naga woman whose life is drastically transformed by the Japanese invasion of Kohima in 1944. Based on real-life diaries and oral histories, the novel explores how ordinary people, especially women, suffered and survived amidst the chaos of war. Mari’s story acts as a surrogate for thousands of unnamed women — those who lost homes, families, and peace — yet whose resilience never made it into official records.

Mari, along with her family, goes through a series of painful ordeals during the Japanese attack. People were forced to vacate their own land because “the town was no longer safe for the civilians” (46). Family members were separated and had no news of each other until the war came to an end. Mari was sent to seek asylum in the dense forest together with some of her neighbours. She was isolated from her family and she lived in the forest for two months to save her life from the Japanese invaders. Her longing for her birthplace, parents and the love for her fiancé Vic disturbed her mentally. Even after the war came to an end, she could hear the sound of shells and bombs that flew over her head. The sleepless nights, hunger, blood stains, amputated bodies, wounded soldiers and the dead bodies in the battlefield completely shattered her life.

Through the sufferings of Mari, Kire reveals the agony and plight of the whole Naga women. No words could really express the pain they have suffered in the hands of the Japanese soldiers. Mari, along with her two sisters, smear ash and mud on their faces to hide their identity. Since they have heard the stories of women being raped and molested, they wrap themselves in torn shawls and behave as though they are sick. The Japanese soldiers target women in order to create panic among the Nagas.

Many women become widows and widowhood is considered a disgrace in the life of a woman. Though there are no obstacles to their second marriage, the Naga women remained unmarried to gain self-respect in society. Widowhood is considered a privilege to prove their loyalty in the marriage bond. They confine themselves in working in their paddy fields. Mari, the protagonist of the novel turns sensitive after the death of her lover Vic, a British soldier. He was shot to death in the Second World War. The second life she chose with Dickie, a British soldier also deceived her. On the announcement of the declaration of Indian Independence, Dickie leaves her with a child in her womb. The sufferings Mari experienced, reflect the struggles of the entire Naga women.

Moreover, Mari brings into the limelight the true voice of the Angami Nagas and the displacement people experienced during the era of World War II. Mari, the protagonist in the story, discloses the daily dread and uncertainties of the Naga society, living as refugees in their own homeland. "It was paradoxical that a village that had offered refuge to others should now be worrying about seeking refuge itself" (57). Their own homeland has become insecure for them to live. The two great imperial powers, England and Japan in order to gain military supremacy, have made the life unbearable for a race far removed from them.

It is very hard to believe that the land miles away from the shores, where people were not even aware of the reasons propelling the war, had to be rebuilt after the siege of Kohima. They were shocked to see their landscape in flames and covered with thick black smoke. "We could not believe our eyes. The peaceful and charming little town that had been our home all these years was going up in smoke! We stood there transfixed" (56). The British army bombed the surrounding areas in order to starve out the Japanese. It is said that the Japanese and the British fought the bloodiest battle in Kohima in the heart of Angami country. According to Lord Mountbatten, "The battle of Kohima will probably go down as one of the greatest battles in history" (61).

There are no words to express the aftereffects of the war:

"...food continued to be a problem. The Japanese occupation of Kohima had attracted a lot of mortar shelling upon the village and in the last stages of the war, the Allied Air Force had resorted to a continuous bombing of the village. The bombings had started fires in several and at one point the entire village burned for days. The abundant granaries and food supplies stored by the villagers to last the year had been burnt and there was no food that could be retrieved or was found edible. Even the few animals that survived the war refused to eat the burnt grain." (105)

Easterine Kire's narratives serve to foreground native voices, via oral folklores, myths, traditions, legends and historical events that still have a pertinence on individual minds. Through this novel, Kire has made an attempt to bring the marginalised to the centre and focus on them with the fair amount of respect which they were refused. The Nagas, through this battle have understood the power of self-representation in order to attain their freedom. By giving voice to these Nagas, Kire rewrites the history of the subaltern into the postcolonial historiography. The British established a war cemetery in honour of the martyrs who sacrificed their lives for their motherland. The inscription of the war memorial of the 2nd Division at the Kohima War Cemetery reads thus:

"When you go home  
tell them of us  
and say for your tomorrow  
we gave our today".

Even today, the war cemetery remembers silently and solemnly the days that once blazed with battle, love and life. It stands not just as a resting place, but as a witness to a time when everything burned - except the courage to dream of peace.

Kire's *Mari* serves as a poignant and powerful literary testimony that gives voice to the voiceless, particularly the forgotten civilians and women of Nagaland who endured the trauma of World War II. Through the lens of personal narrative and historical memory, Kire reconstructs a world often neglected in mainstream Indian and global war histories, allowing the silenced to speak.

Kire's use of a female protagonist is particularly crucial. In traditional narratives of war, women's experiences are marginalised or reduced to passive victimhood. However, in *Mari*, women are agents of survival, moral strength, and cultural memory. *Mari* herself, though young and romantic, matures into a figure of resilience, providing emotional shelter for others even as her own world collapses. In doing so, she becomes a symbolic voice for all women caught in the crossfire of political conflict - those who faced violence, displacement, and cultural erasure.

Moreover, Kire writes in English with Naga idiomatic expressions, preserving indigenous identity and resisting linguistic colonialism. By grounding her narrative in the local – its landscape, food, songs, and traditions – she reclaims a historical space for Naga voices, otherwise excluded from dominant Indian or Western discourses on WWII.

The novel also critiques the political invisibility of the Naga people. Though they were deeply affected by the war, their suffering was neither acknowledged in colonial records nor given due importance in postcolonial India. Kire challenges this historical silencing by reasserting their presence through storytelling. In this sense, *Mari* is not just a personal story but a political act of remembrance, ensuring that the trauma of a marginalized community is not lost to time.

In conclusion, Easterine Kire's *Mari* stands as a testament to the power of literature in giving voice to those whom history has overlooked. Through *Mari*'s quiet strength and Kire's evocative prose, the novel becomes a memorial for the invisible and unheard — the women, the civilians, and the Naga people who bore witness to war with courage, but without recognition.

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