

Victimization of Nagas and Nagaland: Exploring Violence on the Human Body and Environment in Easterine Kire's *Mari*

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Abstract

War is inevitable in nations aspiring to rule the world. Political conflicts ushers war and it embroils the lives of people with the involvement of weapons with great power. Concurrently, it prompts massacre of human lives and destruction of societies. This research paper involves the study of Japanese war and war-torn Nagaland depicted in Easterine Kire's novel *Mari*. By cause of war, Naga human lives and living conditions were unequivocally damaged. The horror that was laid upon the human body was distasteful. The paper explores effects of war on human lives, environment, and human body. This paper is an attempt to bring this Naga novel in light and an opportunity to highlight the sufferings the Nagas underwent, which was caused by Japanese soldiers during the British colonization of India. The study concludes how the hunger for power wrecked the impeccable life of Nagas.

Keywords: Environment; Human body; Nagas; Victims.

Introduction

Literatures like Tamil, Greek, Roman and Hebrew are pioneers to introduce war stories in literary works. Epic works like *The Aeneid*, *Purananuru*, *The Iliad*, *The Odyssey*, *Gilgamesh* are famous for description of battles and wars. These literary works are set in classical era, which proves that war is inevitable in every society. Writers like David Drake, Karl Marlantes, Antony Swofford, Weston Ochse, Chris Ryan and many others are well known war writers deals with various wars like Gulf war, Afghan war, Vietnam war, Spanish war and World War I & II. Each war writer is either a veteran or a survivor. There are various categories of war writers, such

as, 1. writers who write about historical events like tamil war poems in Sangam literature, 2. writers who write about war atrocities along with fiction, 3. writers who lived either in that period or heard those stories from their family members, like *Slaughterhouse- Five* by Kurt Vonnegut, *The Kite Runner* by Khalid Hosseini, *The Red Badge of Courage* by Stephen Crane. War narratives are both fiction and non-fiction, like *The Art of War* by Sun Tzu, *Mein Kampf* by Adolf Hitler, *The Diary of a Young Girl* by Anne Frank; war narratives also include diary entries. The novel selected for this study is an epistolary novel; it is a dairy entry by the protagonist Mari O' Leary.

About the level of facts and history in literary war-based works, Catherine Savage Brosman in her article, "The Functions of War Literature" (1992) comments, "Fiction, drama, and poetry concerning war tend toward recording not simply the causes and conduct of armed conflict or individual battles but the manner in which they are lived, felt, used, and transformed by participants." (Brosman 86)

The novel *Mari* is written by Easterine Kire, the first Naga writer to write novels in English. Easterine Kire's contribution to Naga literature is quite impressive, as she has contributed five poetry collections, nine novels, three short stories collections, one essay collections, two novellas, eight children's books and many translations, anthology books. She received various awards for her literary works, like Bal Sahitya Puraskar award, Hindu Literature Prize, Governor's medal for excellence in Naga literature, Gordan Graham Prize for Naga literature. Kire's works are epitome of Naga literature; she represents her culture, history and people in her literary works. She is the prominent Naga writer and she can be considered as the face of Naga literature. Her works are famous that helped readers recognize Nagaland and Naga history.

Mari is about the Japanese invasion in India through Nagaland. The protagonist narrates her experience during the invasion. She explains how she and her family survived the atrocities of the Japanese soldiers. In real life, Mari was the maternal aunt of the writer Easterine Kire and through her she learned about the war; Mari had recorded all the incidents related to this war in her diary. Mari in her young age saw the refugees of Burma who took refuge in India and she pitied them. After Japanese invasion, Nagas' situation was much worse than Burma refugees, because Nagas had to take refuge in invasion-free areas with Nagaland and starved to death. When refugees came from Burma, Nagas helped them by providing food, clothes and shelter; but Nagas didn't get any outside help during

Japanese invasion and they had to suffer alone. In the prologue, one of Mari's entries is included, in which the author states,

Around me lie books on the war. I have bought every book on The Burma Campaign that I could find. Only we who have seen the war feel this way. We relive it again and again.

I open the diary slowly. The childish scrawl of a young girl fills its pages, and as I read on, I am almost that girl again. Carefree and innocent and oblivious to the way in which the war would change my life forever. I am drawn once again, irresistibly, back into that mad whirl of living, loving and dying. That was the war I knew.

I had thought then that life began at seventeen. And that life also began in Spring. I was seventeen that Spring when I met Victor. And the world was green with the young green of new plants, the hills bathed with thin mist every evening and the nights velvet with the songs of Bing Crosby. It was the Spring of 1943. How little I knew of life then. How very different was Kohima then. (Kire 17-18)

Mari is set in 19th century Nagaland; the entries began in February 1943. The protagonist Mari belongs to a wealthy family, whose father was a British government official; she lived with her mother, father and siblings. Mari was educated and disciplined; after British missionaries, many Nagas converted to Christianity and Mari's family was one of them. In her school days, their teachers taught them how to make use of trenches during war. Finally in March, the talk of war became real and Japanese invasions begun secretly; schools were closed and Mari along with her friends joined the Road department to work on road contracts offered by the British government. There she met a soldier named Victor, whom she addressed as Vic; they both fell in love and decided to get marry. When they were waiting for their wedding, the invasions began severely and people were made to move from the Front Kohima to other nearby villages.

Until British government brought the situation under control, people were asked to take refuge in other invasion free Naga villages. Mari's father, being the government official was transferred to Shillong and so Mari had to leave town with her siblings, as her mother preferred to stay with her old parents. Thus began Mari's refuge journey. The novel narrates how Mari and her siblings face Japanese atrocities, how they escaped and stories of

other refugees. Finally, the military had the situation under control by planning the Operation U-Go; Vic died in the Battle of the Tennis court and it shattered Mari. After war, Nagas started rebuilding their lives. Mari to take care of children from premarital affair, she studied to become a nurse and started working in Assam, where she met Patrick O'Leary and marries him; finally in her old age, Mari settles in Kohima and dies in 2015. This is the history of Nagas during Japanese invasions with Mari as their face and this novel consists of unrecorded Naga history.

War is ineluctable. Countries across the globe face the fatalities of war and recover from it. When Britishers colonized Nagaland, they fought against them; clans joined hands to defeat the British army but they were overpowered by guns and ammos and so they signed a peace treaty. British government introduced schools, a new language and a new religion which was the beginning of the death of Naga original culture. In 1944, Japanese invasion devastated Nagas' lives. It is an example to explore how war destroys a peace-loving land.

War and violence are inseparable, as war is the creator of violence. The violence that Nagas faced during the invasion was very cruel. When Japanese discreetly entered India, they mingled with the Nagas and so it was impossible for Britishers to identify them. People gossiped in whispers about the rumors on Japanese soldiers. Kire writes,

There were so many rumors of Japanese. Some of the men said the Japanese were short and ugly and some said they were like us and treat us well. But there were many different reports and it was difficult to choose what to believe. I hoped we would not fall into Japanese hands to dealt with cruelly. The picture of the refugees who were fleeing the Japanese advance flashed into my head. Some of them bore marks of Japanese torture. There were young children in the group whose parents had been killed by the Japanese. I prayed we would not suffer that. (Kire 65)

When Japanese invaded Nagaland, people had to move from their homes to avoid the violence of war. The protagonist narrates her first direct encounter with the enemy soldiers, when she stayed as a refugee in one of the Naga villages. Kire narrates,

When the Japanese marched into our village, people stopped what they were doing and stood still. We dared not stare at them openly but we managed to catch a glimpse of feared them. They

were stockily built and looked very much like our men, in many ways. Most of them had beards and their clothes were dirty and torn in places. They looked tired but hard-faces. I felt that these were men who might be capable of anything. How terrifying they looked, with their long bayonets pointing at us." (Kire 77)

Nagas hated Japanese soldiers as they were unkind and merciless to them and posed threats. Enemy soldiers created violence upon human body and nature specifically. Because there were deaths of innocents and destructions of land. Hence, this paper aims at discussing the violence of war on human body and nature.

Violence on the Human Body

The human body plays a vital role in the novel *Mari*; people endure both physical and emotional wounds and they scar people for their lives in both mind and body. The physical body in the novel was described as the object to torture, abuse and in corpse form in the stages of autolysis, bloating and decomposition. The Japanese tortured people by violent physical abuse and sexual harassment and they led to traumatic experiences. In the article "‘Battling through the Bodies’: The Human Body and Global Warfare" (2019), Megan Girdwood and Hannah Simpson explains how body was affected during World War II. They scribe, "the shock of the intercorporeal encounter, with the skin figured as an inadequate boundary against the world, and the flesh as the site of a terrifying collision. The body's failure to shield itself from unwanted contact, becomes...parallel to a broader failure of political security in the context of the war, with its own invasions and collisions across boundary lines." (Girdwood and Simpson, 120)

The wretched state of bodies described in the inability or unfortunate situations of the political security. As a result of political failure, Japanese could easily torture the educated Nagas for information about the routes to British camps; so, the migrated town folks disguised themselves as tanned villagers by smearing coal to their faces, cutting their hair short like villagers and dressing themselves with torn Naga shawls and body cloths. "The sunburnt village women are prominently darker than those of us who lived in town. Sitting among the village women, we rubbed coal and ash all over our legs and arms and tried to make ourselves inconspicuous among the village women." (Kire 77). The self-metamorphose of the physical body by both men and women was a traumatic event to Nagas.

Women hid themselves from the Japanese because they knew that they'd be harassed and mutated. "We had also heard of women molested by them, which were spoken of in whispers among the elders, because rape was considered the most heinous crimes and we had known little of it before the Japanese came." (Kire 86). The abuser considers the victim's human body as his own property which gives him the authoritative antagonistic nature. In war, the party in verge of winning the geographical land, considers both material objects and human beings as their own. In an incident in the novel, the protagonist Mari's sister Zhabu was casually signaled by a Japanese soldier to follow him for sexual interactions. When she resisted, she was immorally taken by him. Radhika Kapur in her article "The Impact of Physical Abuse upon the Lives of Women" (2020) states that shoving and holding are certain forms of abuse. Easterine Kire in the novel writes how Zhabu was abused. She states,

While they were still looking around the house, a Japanese soldier came in and signaled to Zhabu to follow him. She ran back to the old man and grabbed his hand. The old man begged the soldier to leave her alone but he bounded up to them and picked her up effortlessly, slung her over his shoulder and was walking away.

Zhabu was only fifteen but she was a sturdy lass and very brave. She bit down on the soldier's arm until she drew blood, the soldier roared in pain and threw her to the ground. She sprang to her feet and ran to the back door of the house where the old man was emerging with a stick to hit the soldier... They were all badly shaken by the experience. We all cried when we heard Zhabu's story." (Kire 90-91)

Zhabu's and Naga women bodies were physically abused and sexually molested by their abductors. Here, the human body is used as an object of pleasure.

Molestation of women is a serious crime in Naga culture and no one dared to touch women in an unkindly manner; the human body in Naga culture is considered sacred but Japanese soldiers freely harassed women. It also the collapse of Naga cultural values. Kire narrates, "We had also heard of women molested by them, which were spoken of in whispers among the elders, because rape was considered the most heinous crimes and we had known little of it before the Japanese came." (Kire 86)

When Naga women were molested, Naga men were tortured mercilessly.

Regarding the physical abuse Jennings in his article "'It's Only Chance That You're Safe and Sound': Meanings of the Body in Humphrey Jennings' A Diary for Timothy" (2019) Mellor states that as "slab of war trauma" (Mellor 164). In the novel *Mari*, the author describes the devastated state of human body in confined state. She scribes, "He was half-starved and covered with body lice. But he had had a lucky escape. As a prisoner he was chained every night to one of his captors. The slightest movement would wake up his captor..." (Kire 89) In Thirukkural, Thiruvalluvar in his chapter, Not Doing Evil (Innaseiyamai) states,

From wisdom's vaunted lore what doth the learner gain,
If as his own he guard not others' souls from pain?. (Couplet 315)

He explains, a man is not a human being, if he cannot understand the pain of other human beings. With reference to Valluvar, it can be understood that the soldiers who brought torture upon Nagas were not men of honour and kindness.

The human body, in this novel, is also portrayed as corpses, where one could find numerable dead bodies of soldiers and commoners. The devastating condition of the corpses were indigestible and sad. Kire writes, "We had never seen so many dead bodies before. True, we had seen some dead Japanese soldiers during our flight in the jungles. But the bodies in town were much more numerous and they lay in different stages of decomposition." (Kire 113). War makes the human body less valuable. "Dead Japanese soldiers lay where they had fallen, unattended and unburied." (Kire 112). In the novel it is mentioned that, British soldiers were given proper burial whereas Japanese soldiers were simply buried in mass. About the violence thrust upon the soldiers' bodies, Hassan Musavi Sharghi in his article "Body as weapon: the archeology of a war victim's narrative" (2019) comments, "the soldier's body is the prime locus where power is exercised. However, although the body is the subject of war, it is also the object: able to prosecute the war and employed to exercise violence itself." (37). This discussion on the role of human body in war reveals that bodies are the targets of violence and inflictors of violence.

Last but not the least, a crucial torture that was vested upon Nagas was hunger. Famine was unavoidable, as their food resources were looted by Japanese soldiers. In an incident, the protagonist Mair claims that they had nothing to crave on except for sugar granules. Famine and hunger victimized Nagas more than any other factors. Japanese soldiers forcefully took the food resources stocked up by Nagas and killed their livestock

for meat. Japanese soldiers robbed Nagas' houses for food; they didn't care whether people stayed or left the village, all they wanted was food, shelter and educated Nagas; once they enter a village, "They quickly set up their wireless systems. Some of them went up to the village people and demanded- in broken English- eggs, chickens, water and rice." (Kire 78).

Diya Gupta in her article "Bodies in Hunger: Literary Representation of the Indian Home-Front During World War II" (2019) writes about hunger and famine during war. She states,

...the physical markers of the violation of the human body during famine, 'naked and half-naked', visualised in the collective... Humanity has depleted, shrunk, 'reduced to skeletons', and reduced too to pleading for help... 'The sight of those naked and half-naked wretches reduced to skeletons was too strong even for the most strong-hearted persons.' If one remains 'strong-hearted' and emotionally unaffected even while witnessing terrible hunger and suffering, such strength is highly morally culpable... (Gupta 200)

Bodies of commoners and soldiers are the major discussion of elements in this topic. Human bodies in various circumstances of war are discussed like molestation, trigger happy shootings, captivation, hunger and famine. Human beings experience world with their bodies, therefore inflicting of violence upon bodies shows the lack of humanity in war. Among focused violences on bodies in war, killing of innocents denotes the uplift of Freud's Thanatos over Eros. "Inhumane crimes and their inflictors are fit to be punished and it is compared to clearing the weeds in a harvest land", says V. Veelaithuraichi in her article "Crime and Punishment in Terms of Valluvam" (2019) through the analysis of Valluvar's couplet,

By punishment of death the cruel to restrain,

Is as when farmer frees from weeds the tender grain (Couplet 550)

Violence on Nature

War is one of the prime factors in the destruction of eco life. Military base, Home Front, Weaponry are also the causes of environmental disturbances. Environmental surroundings include land and water bodies. These were highly damaged by war. People took refuge in forest areas and they were destructed by Japanese soldiers and also by British soldiers, as the land was mercilessly bombed. Joseph P. Hupy in his article, "The Environmental Footprint of War" (2008) categorize environmental disturbanc-

es by war into three, they are,

- (1) Environmental disturbance and destruction from weaponry.
- (2) Direct consumption of resources such as timber, water and food to support armies.
- (3) Indirect consumption of resources by military industrial complexes that supply the war effort. (Hupy 406)

In a nature abiding region like Nagaland, the destruction of environment is a severe and irreplaceable loss. The war described in the novel took place in 1940s Kohima; as a result, both Kohima and the villages surrounding were destroyed. During the Japanese invasion, Kohima was the Home Front of Britishers. Hupy's three categories of environmental disturbances took place in Kohima. The transformation of Kohima from a beautiful place to a devastating place is narrated in the novel with a serious and shocking tone. Kire writes,

When we reached the wooden gate of the village, we heard the loud roar of guns and the sounds of grenades and bombs exploding... The village faces Kohima directly and from the high point where we stood, we could see the town and the houses on top of the hills. How shocked we were to see the whole of Kohima ablaze and covered with thick, black smoke.

We could not believe our eyes. The peaceful and charming little town which had been our home all these was going up in smoke! (Kire 73). Being the Front of Nagaland, Kohima's landscapes were destroyed. It shows the damages caused by war.

We walked through what used to be the town area. None of us were ready for the terrible sight of the ravaged town. Kohima, dear, dear Kohima was so changed from the way we remembered it. Hardly any houses were left standing. The debris of war, bombed-out houses and shelters, and shell cases littered the streets and the town areas. (Kire 112)

Kohima before war was a beautiful place with natural resources. The descriptions of the picturesque beauty of Kohima in the novel was a totally different scenery from the post-war Kohima. She writes,

The orange glow of the setting sun is subdued and the grey of

twilight is quickly overtaking it. The silhouettes of the hills and the neighbourhood houses are sharp in this half-light... My house is in Bayav Hill is still close enough to the woods to allow me to hear the sounds of the birds and insects... I was seventeen that Spring when the young green of new plants, the hills bathed with thin mist every evening and the nights velvet with the songs of Bing Crosby. (Kire 17-18).

One of the best descriptions about Kohima in this novel is as follows:

EVERYONE AGREED that October was the prettiest time of the year, especially when the rains had retreated. Everything had turned ripe yellow and it was a joy to see endless fields of golden paddy before the harvest. We had spent day after day under gentle sunshine and clear skies in these days. The hills turned golden, covered with a wild sunflower that bloomed in Autumn and filled the landscape. (Kire 50)

Agricultural lands were destructed and paddy grains were looted by Japanese armies. Nagaland's chance of surviving the destruction was thin. In Thirukkural, the great poet Thiruvalluvar in the chapter The Land (Naatu) says,

That is a land that yields increase unsought,

That is no land whose gifts with toil are bought. (Couplet 739)

A land is wealthy even if it is unsought and such land is the place of Nagas. Due to war, the land's prosperity was destroyed. The destruction of food providing lands caused severe traumatic damages to Nagas' emotions. Hupy writes,

Deliberate disturbance inflicted upon the agricultural landscape using incendiary and chemical means was also widely employed by armies in antiquity. Although not strictly part of the natural environment, agriculture and crops serve as a strong link between the human and physical landscape and continue to be a target of deliberate destruction in military campaigns. (Hupy 408)

Usage of gun powders in high velocities propelled heavy objects and dried up landscapes; as a result, barren lands remained. Destruction of environment is a winning strategy in war; direct causes like air surgical strikes, bombing, killing livestock, and looting of food resources. Indirect

causes of environmental damages are war refugees, army movements and pollution from arms. So, land is the prime victim of war. Kire writes the post-war effects on land. She states, "People were slowly returning to Kohima. Everywhere we found the same scenes of destruction, and we gingerly picked our way through the debris, fearful of stepping upon a mine, or worse, upon a corpse." (Kire 113- 114). Rafael and others in their article, "The effect of warfare on the environment" states the environmental disturbances by war. They write,

Armed forces may destroy their own environment, or the opposition's, as a strategy to win the war. For example, forests may be destroyed to deny timber or hiding places, and oil wells, freshwater, crops, land, and animals may be damaged to prevent their use by a foe...Damages may also be indirect: troop movement may degrade arable land and vegetation; fighting and arms production may increase pollution and waste; provisions for troops may intensify pressures on resources; norms in favor of environmental protection may deteriorate; and war refugees may dump waste and damage ecosystems in pursuit of food, land, and firewood... (Reuveny, et al, 750)

War is man-made and it is a great opponent of eco life. Men who forget humanity and the meaning of life, embed themselves in the world of war and violence. Destruction of men and nature in war is parallel to the destruction of culture. Cheryl Glotfelty in her work *The Eco Criticism Reader* (1996) writes, "Nature and culture do not exclude each other but be entangled with each other in multiple ways" (Glotfelty iv). Environment goes hand in hand with human life but war destroys the beauty of war. In Sangam literature, *Akananuru* praises nature and highlights its importance in the life of man. About the bonding of man and nature, Uma Ramamoorthy in her article "Eco-Sensibilities in the "Akam" Poems of Sangam Literature" (2021) scribes, "No man ignores the power of Nature over man's thoughts and feelings. The dark and gloomy Nature rouse him to solemn awe and the gay landscape with blue sky and silver clouds give him joy and pleasure." (Ramamoorthy 96). Hence, it shows that man and nature are parallel in universe; therefore, in the violence of war both man and nature are affected.

Conclusion

War can be avoided but it becomes unavoidable when man's greed and power has no bounds. For instance, the takeover of Afghan by Taliban,

attacks of Israel on Palestine could have been avoided but the hunger for power makes it impossible and resulted in war and death of victims. The event of war is recorded in history but the violence of war is not recorded; the violence is always polished and sugar-coated because, they are indigestible and merciless. Through this epistolary novel study, the indigestible events and merciless killings were brought in light. Despite of being the war victims, Nagas can be considered as the children of war and survivors of trigger-happy Japanese soldiers. Despite of undergoing merciless tortures, starvation, abuses, they survived and flourished. Thus, the atrocities and immoral activities upon human body and environment are studied with reference to the novel *Mari*.

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