



Decolonising Narratives in Easterine Kire's *Mari*: A Postcolonial Analysis of Naga Literature

S. Abirami^{1*}, Dr. T. Lilly Golda²

^{1*}(Reg. No: 21212014012006), Research Scholar PG & Research Department of English A.P.C. Mahalaxmi College for Women, Thoothukudi – 628002 Affiliated to Manonmaniam Sundaranar University Abishekapatti, Tirunelveli – 627012, Tamil Nadu, India.

²Assistant Professor A.P.C. Mahalaxmi College for Women, Thoothukudi – 628002 Affiliated to Manonmaniam Sundaranar University Abishekapatti, Tirunelveli – 627012, Tamil Nadu, India.

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ABSTRACT

This article examines the decolonising narratives in Easterine Kire's novel *Mari*, viewing it in the broader context of Naga literature and postcolonial studies. Through a close examination of Kire's storytelling techniques, incorporation of oral traditions, and depiction of the Battle of Kohima, this article demonstrates that *Mari* is an effective means of recovering Naga history and defying dominant Western narratives of World War II. This paper highlights that Kire's work helps in the preservation of Naga cultural heritage while also engaging with global discourse on war, memory and indigenous identity through decolonial and postcolonial theoretical frameworks. This article places *Mari* as an essential contribution to the decolonisation of literature, presenting new understandings of historical events and a paradigm for integrating indigenous narrative techniques.

Keywords: Decolonising Narratives, Battle of Kohima, Naga writing

Easterine Kire's contribution to Naga literature represents a significant step in decolonising historical narratives, particularly in the context of World War II literature. Her novel *Mari*, published in 2010, offers a unique perspective on the Battle of Kohima, a crucial engagement in the Burma Campaign of World War II. By centring the Naga experience in this global conflict, Kire challenges the predominantly Western narratives that have long dominated war literature.

The intersection of postcolonialism and decoloniality offers a significant framework to examine Naga literature and history. Bhambra notes "While postcolonial studies emerged in the 1960s focusing on the cultural and social impacts of colonial rule, decolonial studies, originating in the 1990s, emphasize the persistent social structures rooted in colonialism" (115). This theoretical space provides an ideal setting for analysing Kire's work and its purpose within the larger context of Indian and global literature.

The purpose of this study is to examine the decolonising narratives in *Mari* through a postcolonial lens, exploring how Kire uses indigenous storytelling techniques, oral traditions, and historical events to challenge colonial notions. This demonstrates how *Mari* presents a framework for decolonising historical narratives and contributing to the diversity of postcolonial literature.

Easterine Kire, as a pioneering Naga author writing in English, is influential in integrating indigenous Naga oral storytelling with contemporary literary genres. According to Longkumer, "Kire's work serves as a cultural bridge, documenting folklore, translating oral traditions to written form, and offering contemporary interpretations of traditional narratives" (78). This process of translation and change involves both linguistic and cultural aspects, as it involves adapting indigenous storytelling practices to the novel form.

The decolonial perspective in Naga literature is especially significant considering the region's complicated history of colonisation, first during British administration, then later as part of independent India. Mignolo states that "Decoloniality is not just about political and economic decolonization, but also about the decolonization of knowledge and being" (45). In this context, Kire's work can be viewed as an act of epistemic decolonisation, regaining Naga history and cultural knowledge from colonial and postcolonial narratives that often denigrate or deceive indigenous realities.

Through *Mari*, Kire employs decolonising narratives to challenge dominant Western perspectives on World War II. By focusing on the experiences of *Mari*, a young Naga woman, Kire shifts the narrative focus from the

typically centred British or Japanese soldiers to the local population. This narrative choice aligns with what Spivak terms “strategic essentialism,” using the subaltern voice to challenge hegemonic discourses.

Kire seamlessly weaves traditional Naga storytelling techniques into the novel’s structure. As the author herself notes, “For Mari and others of her generation, World War II and the Japanese invasion of our lands was the most momentous period of our lives... All my oral narrators told me this about the war: ‘It altered our lives completely’” (Kire viii). This integration of oral history into the written narrative serves to validate and preserve indigenous knowledge systems.

Mari incorporates Angami Naga terms and phrases, resulting in a linguistic hybridity that decolonises the English language by adapting it to express Naga reality. Bhabha argues that this language strategy is distinctive of postcolonial literature. Kire develops a unique linguistic landscape by merging English with Angami Naga, reflecting the Naga people’s cultural hybridity. This linguistic hybridity helps to decolonise the English language, making it more inclusive and reflective of the Naga community’s varied experiences and identities. Kire’s portrayal of the Battle of Kohima offers a counternarrative to official historical accounts. As Baruah points out, “Kire’s narrative provides insight into the often-overlooked contributions of the Naga people to the Allied war effort, while also highlighting the devastating impact of the conflict on local communities” (132). Through Mari’s character development, Kire explores the complexities of Naga identity in the face of colonial and wartime pressures. This nuanced portrayal challenges essentialist views of indigenous cultures and demonstrates what Bhabha calls the “hybrid” nature of postcolonial identities.

Mari provides a unique perspective on the Battle of Kohima literature, emphasising the Naga experience. The battle, which lasted from April to June 1944, was a turning point in the Burma Campaign of World War II. While numerous historical experiences and memoirs have been written about this war, the majority have focused on the experiences of British and Japanese forces.

As Kire states in the novel’s introduction, “What is so remarkable about the World War II, which is still referred as The War by the Nagas, is that the people have very little memory of what they were doing before the war years” (viii). This statement emphasises the profound impact of the war on Naga society and the importance of preserving these memories through literature.

The novel’s portrayal of the battle highlights several aspects that are often overlooked in traditional military histories. Kire depicts the crucial roles played by Naga people as guides, porters, and intelligence gatherers for the Allied forces. This representation aligns with historical records, as noted by Keane (2010): “Without the help of the Nagas, we could not have turned the tables on the Japanese” (213).

Through Mari’s perspective, readers gain insight into the experiences of civilians caught in the crossfire. The novel vividly portrays the displacement, food shortages, and constant fear that characterised life for Naga communities during the battle. Kire also explores how the battle and the broader war affected Naga cultural practices and social structures. This aspect of the conflict is rarely addressed in military histories but is crucial for understanding the long-term impacts of the war on Naga society. By focusing on Mari’s experiences, Kire provides a gendered perspective on the war, highlighting the specific challenges faced by Naga women during and after the conflict.

Kire’s approach in *Mari* demonstrates how modern literature can serve as a vehicle for preserving and revitalising oral traditions while simultaneously engaging with contemporary literary discourses. As the author herself states, “I was left with the impression that the war is equivalent to the big bang, the beginning of all life” (viii). This statement underscores the transformative power of storytelling in shaping cultural memory and identity.

Through its new perspectives on historical events and its role in incorporating indigenous storytelling techniques into contemporary fiction, Easterine Kire’s *Mari* offers a significant contribution to the decolonisation of literature. Kire’s nuanced representation of the Naga experience during the Battle of Kohima questions dominant Western narratives of World War II and emphasises the relevance of indigenous voices in global historical discourses.

By providing a platform for Naga voices and experiences, *Mari* contributes to the broader project of decolonising historical narratives and challenging the hegemony of Western perspectives in global literature. Thus, Easterine Kire’s *Mari* stands as a powerful example of how literature can serve as a vehicle for decolonisation, cultural preservation, and the assertion of indigenous perspectives. As one continues to grapple with the legacies of colonialism and the complexities of global conflicts, works like *Mari* remind us of the importance of listening to diverse voices and recognising the multiplicity of human experiences.

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