

SILENCED NARRATIVES IN EASTERINE KIRE'S 'MARI'

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Abstract- Easterine Kire's *Mari* (2010) is a tale of forgotten past which narrates the silences of history. *Mari* unravels the sufferings and plunges into the turmoil of World War II which has shaken the lives and everything around it in the Naga Hills. Japanese invasion of India via Naga Hills in 1944 to overthrow the British Raj in India carved a niche in the meta-narratives of European historians and war historians who examined the strategic aspects of the War and its aftermath but Kire's mission in writing the story is to unfold the untold human emotions, experiences and anxieties of the War events. Hers is the first ever attempt by an insider to shift the focal point of history from grand-narratives to local narratives and let the world know and remember the forgotten past, people and the place. Even though Kire is not a historian but her method of storytelling in this novel with the help of mundane experiences, memory and with the help of a diary kept by her aunt Mari (the protagonist of the piece) during and after the War unveils the plight and traumatic experiences of local people during the War which shattered their lives and they became homeless and refugees in their own land. This paper tends to narrate the silences of the World War II and the author's earnest endeavours to let the unheard voices heard by the world and remember that.

Keywords – silence, narratives, World War II, sufferings, unheard voices

I. INTRODUCTION

Easterine Kire's novel 'Mari' sets in 1940s and runs through 90s and gives a vivid description of life and its people before, during and after the World War II in Kohima. Khrielievu Mari O'Leary, the eldest sister of the author's mother and the protagonist of the piece, who survived and lived through the World War II narrates the pre-war Kohima as

"Flowers grew wild all over town because there were such few houses. Here and there were flowering trees like the pink bohemia and the scarlet flame of the forest. The town certainly looked colourful with the trees and flowers all around." (*Mari*, 10)

The pre-war town of Kohima has been recreated mostly through author's mother's and Mari's eyes. They told our author about landmarks in the town such as the shops and the schools and hospitals etc. Nothing significant was remembered by the people about what they were doing before the war.

"Everything happened at the same time. Growing up, falling in love, war, homelessness, starvation, death and partying and, finally, peace....." (*Kire*, IX)

Mari is a tale of 'forgotten battle' also known as 'Stalingrad of the East' which was fought between British Allied Forces and Japanese Army from 4th April to 22nd June 1944. After the successful conquest against the Dutch West Indies and the Philippines and against mainland Asia and Oceania-the codenamed operation U-Goby Japanese intended to uproot the British Raj from India under the Commandership of General Renya Mutaguchi of the Japanese 15th Army. The Allied Force under the leadership of Colonel Hugh Richards with the help of some local Nagas who acted as Scouts, Spies, Stretcher bearers and ammunition carriers uprooted the Japanese from Kohima Garrison Hills. Nevertheless Kire's novel 'Mari' is much more than the Battle of Kohima which most of the world is unaware of. It is a tale of a young mother who dares to live on for her child after the death of her fiancé in the war and a first ever account of the events by an insider. Even though Kire is not a historian, her storytelling spares nothing significant and no historical facts were missed. She fictionalizes history with her magical touch, human

emotions and with her narratives. The novel reconstructs the past with the help of memory and narratives – specially the silenced one. According to Kire, “Narratives are silenced because of the conflict and also because the Nagas have always been written about rather than writing about themselves.” (Speaking Truth to Power: The 2011 English Pen)

Michel-Rolph Trouillot in his book ‘Silencing the past’ is concerned with the various silences which spring up in the process of making history and he identifies four specifically:

- there is a silencing in the making of sources. Which events even get described or remembered in a manner which allows them to transcend the present in which they occurred? Not everything gets remembered or recorded. Some parts of reality get silenced.
- there is a silencing in the creation of archives-the repositories of historical records. Again, choices are made, accidents occur, judgements made, and some of our recorded past is silenced. At times this archival silencing is permanent silence the records do not get preserved; other times the silencing is in the process of competition for the attention of narrators, the later tellers of the historical tales.
- the narrators themselves necessarily silence much. In most of history the archives are massive. Choices, selections, valuing must be done. In this process, huge areas of archival remains are silenced.
- finally, not every narrative becomes a part of the “corpus”, the standard historical narrative received and accepted by the various groups as the past. This “corpus” will be different for professional historians, critical readers, the general public and so on, but only a handful of narratives become the final produce: “history”.

Giving voice to the silenced narratives is one of the significant motives of Kire’s writings. As the oral narratives of Nagas are almost dying, Kire undertakes the daunting task of Narrativizing the silences – especially war silences and silences implicated by insurgency in Nagaland. Kire’s novel ‘A Naga Village Remembered’, describes the silences from the war they fought against British colonialist. ‘Life on Hold’ narrates the silences and ideological differences among the Naga brethren fighting for freedom. Again ‘Bitter Wormwood’ narrates the silences of Indo-Naga conflict and how lives have changed because of decade long freedom struggle.

The novel under discussion also narrates the silences of World War II which changed life overnight. Mari (the protagonist) described it in the prologue of the novel as: “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, into that mad whirl of living, loving and dying. That was the war I knew.” (Mari, 2)

Life started for Mari at seventeen when she fell in love with Victor, a Sergeant Major in the British army and had dreamt colourful dreams with him. She wanted the war to end so that she could live happily ever after with her man. But the brutality of the war snatched her dreams away. She was shattered into pieces as she heard the news of her fiancé’s death from her cousin Jimmy. She says: “My world collapsed at his words. Vic dead! Vic killed by a sniper’s bullet.....the news sank in slowly. I wanted to scream but a choked cry was all that came out of my throat.” (Mari, 86)

As soon as the Japanese entered into the eastern part of Kohima in 1944, people started living their villages and wandering from one village to the other. Mari and her family were separated. The Japanese army became ruthless. They were killing, molesting, raping and threatening people for food and shelter. Mari and her sisters suffered unfathomably – there were no foods, no edible herbs to be found in the jungle, no fruits, no fish in the streams – they were hungry and lonely. In March 1944 Kohima became like a ghost town because everybody including the businessmen, shopkeepers and plainmen fled to Dimapur and beyond. The town of Kohima changed drastically after the war. The beauty and serenity of the town is a matter of past the town became garbage as Mari describes it in these following lines:

“The front yard which used to be filled with flowers was unrecognizable. Large craters had been left by the shells and there were lot of ammunition near the house, from different – sized mortar shells to glittering rifle shots.” (Mari, 94)

War was over by 22nd of June 1944 and left Mari grief stricken but Mari’s indomitable will power enabled her to gather courage to live on for her children – Marion from Vic and Lily from Dikie, another soldier in British army. After Dikie left Mari and went to England, Mari decided to be someone in her life and do something for her

children and parents. She joined nursing course in Christian Medical College in Ludhiana in 1950 and thereafter at St. Stephens's Hospital in Delhi and finally in 1956 she joined Digboi Assam Oil Company Hospital as a member of their senior staff. While serving at Assam she met Patrick O'Leary, who had been working at Assam Oil Company and eventually married him to be happy again. Mari's daughter's Marion and Lily grew up and got married. Things were going well in her homeland but in late 50's and early 60's Naga war with Indian army gathered momentum and news from home about the brutality of Indian army and measureless suffering of innocent people troubled her.

Kire portrays the naked reality of the war that is fought in Kohima in particular and Nagaland in general. Even though Nagas were not directly associated with the war yet the worst sufferers were they. They were victimized, marginalized and were used for the selfish purpose in the pre and post war milieu. Their anxiety and agony could not acquire a place in the meta-narratives of the British colonial period. Many anthropological accounts were made by British political officers like RG Woodthrope, JH Hutton, JP Mills, Christoph Von Furer Heimendorf, Ursulla Graham Bower and WG Archer about the Nagas but their sufferings and psyche were never aired by those writers.

Silences get their voices and came to the public domain from the closet by Kire's authentic narratives. She portrays lives, feelings, and experiences as Naga people lived, felt and experienced during the Battle. The events voiced in the novel are no imagination. Kire spoke and interviewed several survivors of World War II to get the facts. Kire says, "I spoke to and interviewed several survivors of World War II in Kohima village for 'The Battle of Kohima'. They all told me that the war was the most wonderful period of their lives. Exciting to be evacuated, to see aircraft, air fights, shelling of villages, intense military activity and soldiers from different nations. I wrote from the standpoint of the people who had experienced it....." (Morung Express)

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