'Heroic-Imaginary' or 'Survivor-Instinct': Kire's *Mari* a Case to Point

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Abstract

The classical tradition of heroic narratives eulogising ideals of heroism in war evolved with the overwhelming human misery of 'real wars'. The two extremes portraying idealism of super-human grit and courage versus the existential loss of common suffering, exist in sharp opposition to each other.

Mari, a fictional war narrative by Easterine Kire presents an alternative view that is uniquely distinct from the skewed polarities. The Battle of Kohima described in the novel narrates how a docile young girl grows in courage simply to live. The novel resonates that victory or defeat can never match the importance of survival and transformation.

Keywords: Easterine Kire, *Mari*, War, Identity, Loss, Survival, Transformation

The depiction of war in literature has been evolving over a continuum. The dawn of civilisation seems ingrained in the rock-paintings of hunting scenes sketched on the walls of stone-age caves. Symbols such as horns and arrows that distinguish valiant warriors reveal that man had learned to eulogise war even before he picked up proper speech. Nearly all ancient civilisations have a deity of war who is worshipped in the native cultural tradition. Skanda in India, Ares and Athena in Greece, Mars and Minerva in Rome are just a few

deities from the huge pantheon of mighty war-gods. The epics of the classical tradition, such as the *Mahabharata* and *Ramayana* from the East and the Iliad and Odyssey from the West, also reinforce the heroic way in which war was conventionally ascribed a place in literature.

Battles were described with a heroic glimmer in the early days of monarchical rule. Noble virtues of valour and courage were glorified through various forms of literature – historic, poetic, dramatic, legendary or fictional. Both war-heroes and martyrs were honoured as super-heroes. Allegories aligned warfare with spirituality and thematic areas such as the 'internal war' and victory over the self.

Eventually, the gradual shift from monarchy to governance exposed the Machiavellian pursuits of power with a greater degree of transparency. Gradually, people began to question idealism tied to wars. Shaw's popular character, the " chocolate-cream hero" or Captain Bluntschli in Arms and Man, became a mouthpiece of the public. Bluntschli is presented as a character in the novel who is very different on the battlefield from what his lady-love Raina imagines to be like. The work widely publicised the vanity of hero-worshiping the soldiers deemed to be heroes of wars. The tradition that cast a doubt on the 'heroic-imaginary' in a subtle thought-provoking vein continued with writers like Joseph Condrad.

The mammoth turning-point inevitably came through the expressions of survivors of the two World Wars. Henceforth, the narratives of war were splashed with blood and flesh. The sweet-worded euphemisms and eulogy of courage charged with poetic fantasy was put in the trash. The protagonist was not a warrior but an ordinary, destitute man with virtually no ability, hope or strength. Existentialism controlled the bleak narratives and drove the point: it is meaningless to exist. The absolute abandonment of hope and weakened sense of willingness to continue to even live became a typified thought and expression.

At some blurry point in time, sporadic narratives of war began to be written. These narratives are often unique as they blend points from the two traditions to narrate their own distinctive cultural experience.

The tradition of Indian story-telling about war, too, has come a long way since the glorious days of epic wars. The war that the classical texts eulogise is a symbol of the human struggle within the internal self, wherein the spiritually adept or victor defeats his internal enemies to obtain victory over his own self. Among the highest feats of such spiritual accomplishments, the victory over the ego is considered extremely laudable. Likewise, the war deities of the ancient civilisations had been conventionally worshipped for victory over both internal and external enemies.

The war, as we perceive it today, is not a symbol but a real event. The aftermath of human misery, suffering and devastation is far more overwhelming than the symbolic language of heroic conduct linked with valour and spiritual emancipation. The reality of human lust for power, possession and greed for political or economic control of a territory is clearly spelled out as the chief reason for the loss of innocent lives and the devastation of property. Apart from the visible human pain and misery, the role of war in eradicating the cultural and ethnic entity of a territory and its people is significant.

Mari, a war narrative written by Easterine Kire stands out for a few reasons. The novel deviates from the existential complexity popular in the West to build a story that is true for its own ethnic concerns. The narrative describes the fear and anxiety of the natives, it does not turn absolutely bleak or meaningless in its rendition. Though Mari is an ordinary village girl she musters courage in her battle to survive. The story contrasts Mari's weak disposition in comparison to her lover Victor, who is a soldier. The tough spirit of the soldier succumbs to defeat in the narrative, the simple strength of a survivor wins over by a transformation. The

story of Mari is not just a novel about war but is rather about the simple victory of willingness to survive. The story reveals the true colours of life, as it is hard to imagine real people sticking to either ideals of honour in the face of death, or to turn indifferent and calmly appear ready to be shot. The instinct of the survivor is the reality of war, something that may even turn a weak person to fight. The spontaneous response to death truly is life.

The novel recounts how simple Nagamese people are stirred to live during the palls of lingering death they faced during the Battle of Kohima. Mari, a young woman of this society, serves as a symbol of the Nagamese cultural and ethnic identity. She symbolically survives the trauma of war not by winning, losing, or fighting, but by adapting and transforming. Like her, her fellow survivors adapt culturally during the battle. And like them all, the culture and ethnicity of the beautiful place continues to survive through transformation.

Kire was inspired by true episodes based on the life of her aunt, Khrielievu Mari O'Leary. She narrates this story like the regional oral folk songs flowing over generations. The story flows from her aunt, to her and is finally passed on to her readers. Every aspect of the work bubbles with the regional effervescence of Nagamese culture.

The narrative structure of the novel has three distinct parts. In the first part, Mari lives in the idyllic pre-war Kohima. She loves Victor, a British soldier, who represents the 'Heroic-Imaginary'. In the second part, the plot describes the horrors of war, which arouses a sentiment of pity. This section is close to a real war narrative of suffering but it does manage to stay away from the crisis of existential suffering. The third and concluding part, portrays Mari as a representative of the surviving heritage of Anagami Nagamese. She manages to win simply by staying alive and managing to sustain herself through the trials of life. Though, in order to survive, she has to transform and change. Like Mari, her culture and community manage not to perish. But the community sacrifices a large part of what they cherish as their

own identity. The people adapt and embrace new ideas through their interactions with the West.

The story, in the first part, recounts an idyllic period when Marie is a cheerful teenager who lives a leisurely life in the beauteous, peaceful and pastoral Kohima. She is full of passion for her lover, Staff Sergeant Victor. Life is warm and pleasant in her beautiful bamboo-house that lies in the middle of the mirth of rippling flowers, herbs, and plum vegetables. The life of her community is peaceful and blissful in their paradisal home-town, Kohima.

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

Subsequently, continuing the first part, Kire describes the traditions, customs, and routine of the Nagamese people that bring to life the routine and life of the close-knit community. The description invokes the picture of happy country people thriving and throbbing in a world of their own. The people of the tribe stay content and desire little beyond their small circle of existence.

Mari and the women of her community are described as being naive, polite, and submissive. They keep themselves occupied with their regular chores. Their lives revolve around regular household routine like cooking, weaving clothes and working in the fields.

Their opinion about their own self-identity becomes evident in the following conversation between Mari's mother and her aunt:

> In Naga beliefs, woman's primary role is to look after household chores and children; therefore, educating girls is considered as waste of time. (Kire,32)

This simple world view is bound to change as the novel matures in the second part. Mari's relationship with Victor, the British soldier, intensifies. Mari's family accepts her relationship with Victor in spite of the cultural differences and they are formally engaged.

Ironically, as they begin to dream of a happy future together, the Battle of Kohima clips the feathers of their hopeful union and the inevitability of a war becomes apparent.

Fate upturns their human endeavors, and Mari's family has to separate when her father, a Treasury officer, receives orders to report to Shillong. Her younger sisters also have to go to a nearby village. Due to the war, Mari and Victor can't get married but start living together.

In a painful development, Victor gets killed as Japan sieges Kohima. The heroic spirit of valour symbolically comes to an end with his death. Without Victor to aid her, Mari now has to learn to survive on her own and she does manage simply as a spontaneous reflex.

After their victory, the Japanese troops march on and are about to come near Mari's colony. She has to leave her house and go along with her sisters. The young girls take shelter in the dense forest and keep running about, hiding in hills and valleys to protect themselves from the Japanese army. Other natives, too, scurry about in the forest. With no food, they are left with no choice but to kill their own cattle. Acting upon a rumour, that the army spared educated-looking men whom they thought might be of help as spies, the native men begin to cut their hair so as to appear educated. Mari and her sisters smear a mixture of coal and ash like other women in an effort to escape from the rampage of rape and molestation.

An overwhelming sense of anxiety spreads over the erstwhile silent landscape, which is fearfully stirred by the noise of firing bullets. Mari continues her fight to live even on an empty stomach when she discovers that she is pregnant. Her sense of joy is muffled by the fear of death, grief of Victor's death and the trials of existence.

Despite the grim chances of her survival, Mari does not give up hope and struggles to live. Her fight is dissimilar from that of Victor, the imaginary symbol of a war who fights and sacrifices his life in the war. Victor's heroism seems less heroic than Mari's struggle to live. She overcomes the predicament that chains her as a victim by fighting her way out like an incorrigible survivor. Though valiant war heroes like Victor perish in the war, survivors like Mari and her unborn child live on to take forward their legacy of loss, which transforms them forever.

The third part of the novel describes how Mari gathers herself after the war and how people of her community work to rebuild their society. The community gathers after the deputy commissioner issues directions to build a new village. They begin the work by levelling down the ruined old houses that serve as symbols of a painful past which must be forgotten to give birth to the present. The village elders are enraged at the idea of clearing the ruins but eventually agree. After the land is levelled, people start building new houses.

The new houses serve as a symbol of transformation and survival instinct and aptly seem to be "stronger". Nature too seems to support their efforts to rebuild with the blooming of flowers in spring. Gradually, people come out of mourning and life begins to move on once again.

Mari also makes efforts to rebuild her life again. She is full of new hope after giving birth to Victor's daughter. She finds love once again and begins a relationship with another British soldier, Dickie and has another daughter. But shortly after she is born, Dickie is

transferred out of Kohima. Mari is unwilling to leave her family and decides to stay in her village and raise her daughters alone. She decides to fulfill her dream of becoming a nurse and moves to Delhi to study. She finds a job and falls in love with Pat, a tea planter, whom she finally marries. At the end of the story, Mari is an educated lady, who is financially independent and mature enough to raise her daughter. She is married to a like-minded partner who understands her and treats her with love. She is at peace in her beautiful hometown, which is full of warmth, fulfillment, and security.

Mari thus transforms for the better. She starts as a timid, docile young girl and ends up being educated, independent and confident. The story places war in the middle of the narrative, and begins and ends on a fulfilling note. Even while the war continues, Mari does not give up on hope. Her story is the story of the resilience of the spirit of her community, where she survived and passed on a transforming legacy.

To conclude, the novel realistically captures the impact of war but the narrative keeps a distance from the existential crisis of pointlessness. Victor becomes the symbol of the 'heroic-imaginary' but the plot goes beyond the spirit of fighting and the power of destruction to reiterate the incorrigible resilience of survival.

Mari, a mild-mannered woman of submissive temperament, overcomes what the war-hero Victor could not. She is truly the 'real hero' of the novel who secures victory through her sheer determination to survive. She becomes the epitome of transformation, who woefully settles to brutally dissolve the glory of her past and adjust to the changing rhythm of existence. The protagonist Mari, as well as the people of her fraternity, amalgamate their lives and survive beyond the sense of loss of their vanishing heritage, crumbling traditions and culture and refigure themselves to live and pass on what they own to a new generation.

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