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## THE WIND OF CHANGE: EXPLORING SOCIO-POLITICAL, ECONOMIC, AND CULTURAL RAMIFICATION OF POST-WAR SCENARIO IN ESTERINE KIRE'S *MARI*

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### Abstract:

Esterine Kire is the first Naga Novelist to write in English brings to life the authentic, the forgotten and undocumented period of history of Naga people amidst the horror of Second World War. It is a poignant story of a young Angami Naga girl, Mari or Khrielievu Mari O'Leary that is being narrated by the author, who is her niece. *Mari* is situated at the backdrop of battle of Kohima that ended the Japanese invasion of India during WWII. The battle, also called 'the Stalingrad of the East' fought around the Kohima town. The protagonist of the story is seventeen-year-old young girl named Mari and her love story with a British sergeant named Vic and how she lost him to the Battle of Kohima; got separated with her family during the bombings; became refugee in her own homeland and survived the whole traumatic experience of Second World War and later narrated it to the author. This paper however would attempt to critically examine how the Second World War was responsible for changing the socio-political, economic, and cultural milieu of North-East India. It will also focus on the psychological ramification of Second World War on the people of Kohima.

**Key words:** Second World War, North-East India, Identity, Psychological Trauma, Displacement

### Introduction

The Second World War was one of the bloodiest and destructive war ever fought in the history of mankind, in a grim battle against fascism and militarism. Countries like China, Korea, Burma, Indonesia, Philippines, Malayasia, and India faced struggles due to Japanese militarism. Over two and a half million Indians served in the British Army and another two million Africans and Asians were in the auxiliary services. (D.Yefimov). About 74,000 of Indians were killed and many more were wounded. The Viceroy unilaterally declared that the British Indian Army would fight in the war for the British without consulting the Indian leaders.

The end of the Second World War marked the beginning of a new spirit of revolution and liberation movement in India. (D. Yefimov,94). The War brought the global conflict between Allied forces and the Axis powers to India's North-east. Some of the fiercest wars were fought in this region. Kohima and Imphal ended up as a part of the Great War. The British conquest of Assam and other princely and tribal lands gave rise to the concept of North Eastern Frontier States and after the withdrawal of the British, the process of partition led to the emergence of the region into a distinct region. (Binalakshmi Nepam, 71)

### Political Change

World War II had a substantial impact on North-East Indians. It exposed them to global changes and led to shifts in cultural values; more open, liberal, egalitarian, humanistic and significant political changes tied to decolonization in Asia, Africa and Latin America. Lord Mountbatten highlighted the importance of the battle of Kohima as one of the greatest battles in history. (47, Ibid)

Another important political impact of the Second World War on the Naga People was that the British were deeply gratified for the Naga's loyalty. Thus, the deputy commissioner's bungalow became meeting spot for Naga leaders to discuss their political aspirations. In April 1946 C.R Pawsey set up the Naga Hills District Tribal Council to unite the Naga Hills Nagas and repair the war damage. Later, this council changed its name to the Naga National Council.

The aim of NNC was to foster the welfare and social aspirations of the Nagas and to receive official patronage as a unifying and moderating influence.



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Thus, going by this resolution, the original political objective of NNC was to achieve local autonomy for the hills within the province of Assam and to train the Nagas for self-government (Patel, p 518). But, the President of Indian Congress Party, Sri Jawaharlal Nehru in his letter clearly highlighted his apprehensions regarding the notion of self-government of the Nagas. (The Selected Works of Nehru page 278 - 80).

Post Second World War, the cabinet Mission Visited India, and the Naga council formed in 1946 told them that Naga's would not accept decisions without being consulted. As India's transfer power neared, Naga leaders made clear their demand for full independence. But the congress did not favor this proposal, citing Naga's need for support due to their perceived backwardness and the lands limited capacity to stand alone politically and economically. The congress felt granting sovereignty would isolate the Naga between India and China. A delegation led by Phizo met with Lord Mountbatten, suggesting India act as a guardian power for 10 years, after which the Nagas would decide their future. The committee refused the proposal and the Naga National Council insisted on a separate council for the Nagas. (Legislative Assembly Debates p 21,33) but later to maintain peace the Naga Council accepted India's sovereignty.

Esterine Kire's *Mari* is set against backdrop of the aforementioned political turmoil and an advent of a new dawn in Kohima.

### Economic impact

The economic impact of Second World War on North-East India specially in Kohima was unprecedented. As a result of the war, the economy of the Nagas was seriously damaged. Moreover, Kohima and the surrounding villages were completely devastated by aerial bombardment as well as ground battles. The extent of the impact of the second World War on the Nagas was lucidly expressed by Esterine in her *Mari* "By the end of March, Kohima was like a ghost town, the traders at Kohima, who were mostly plainmen, had fled to Dimapur and beyond, having sold their shops and closed their shutters when they couldn't sell. Long gone are the open markets and hawkers that added so much colour to the town. The Manipuri women, with their wares of dried fish and peanut brittle and jaggery, were missing...with shop closed, there was no movement on the streets. No one loitered around anymore and the vegetable looked run-down.... the town was no longer safe for civilians. (Kire, *Mari*, 46p)...The paddy in the granaries had been burnt and was unfit and was unfit for consumption. There was not a single animal to be found, neither pigs nor chickens, for the Japanese had slaughtered and eaten everything. P 71. (Kire, *Mari*) Pigs and Poultry which formed their domestic economy were largely wiped out. (slim, p54)

The other facet of the impact of Second World War was inflation which became a matter of concern to the government. In view of the development of the region on the war footing, specially for road construction, there was unprecedented flow of money into the region in general and to the individual public in the form of coolie wages. Speaking of the economic effect of the Second World War on the region, in June 1943, the Governor of Assam wrote to the viceroy of India "while war has its inconveniences and damages it has phenomenally pleasant effects on their pockets. For this is all the worst spots for inflation in the corner of India that is feeling inflation most. In Manipur for example, the ordinary price of a new bicycle is rs. 650 to rs. 700. As such as rs. 1000 has been paid for one- and second-hand ones fetch rs. 400 and more...on the road Nagas, to whom five annas a day was wealth before war, can still earn upto five rupees a day in places, despite the reduced work... the populace has now more money than it has any use for. (Linlitglow papers).

India was also experiencing severe economic hardships. Vast military expenditures and the curtailing of agricultural production led to the rapid growth of prices. Savage exploitation by the feudal lord and colonialist brought the peasants to ruin. The Indian workers were also in similar plight.

During the War, the taxes on the Indians multiplied to meet the unprecedented due to expenditure of the War and the same was combined with high inflation which India never saw earlier. The trade also lost its sheen due to global crisis. The financial, industrial assistance of India formed a crucial component of the British campaign against Imperial Japan.



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There were serious macro and micro economic issues from the war. Families lost male members and women were forced to seek employment in unprecedented numbers. The factories also needed workers in the place of those who were sent to war and died. So, the women folk did find jobs. The War created another dimension, the gender imbalance of thousands of men died in the war which created surplus women. The number of unmarried women seeking employment grew dramatically. In addition, demobilization and economic crisis led to large scale unemployment and released many men to seek the unavailable jobs. Many war time factories close down. The war increased female employment to an extent. (colonel Y Udaya),163.

Kire's protagonist Mari is one such example of working woman who after umpteenth trail and tribulation maneuvered her way in a war-torn world and finally created an identity of her own. In her words "when I was in my final year of nursing, I came across an advertisement inviting young women to join the military nursing services. I was taken by it and sent off my application at once. During the war, some of the older girls had joined the nursing services...now my application was accepted and shortly after, I was asked to appear for the interview in New Delhi"

### Roads and reconstruction

The Second World also wreaked havoc on the infrastructure of Nagaland, especially Kohima. "Kohima, dear, dear Kohima, had changed so much from the way we remembered it. Hardly any houses were left standing. The debris of war, bombed-out houses and shelters and empty bomb shells littered the streets. (Kire, *Mari*, 93).

The Corps Royal Engineers issued invitation to the civilian contractors to build new roads under their supervision. The engineers were in a hurry to build these new roads. So, there were a large number of young men and women from Kohima village who took up construction work. (Kire, p 20).

After the war ended in Kohima, the community came together to rebuild houses. Sounds of hammers on beams and tin came to replace the loud burst of constant shelling that had filled the skies during the war months. (Kire, *Mari*, 104)

There were many positive impacts of the Second world War on the economy and infrastructure of Kohima -

"A great number of new roads were built during the war. The Naga freedom struggle that followed upon the heels of the war cast a dark shadow over our lands. In retrospect, there are many who continue to see the war years as the best years of their lives. It has been romanticized. Grim? Certainly. But they were years filled with all the elements of romance: heroic deeds, the loss of lives, fear, uncertainty, and deep love." P(ix, Kire, *Mari*)

The government then appointed men to list the names of those whose houses had been destroyed. then they began to supply us with tin and timber as compensation. The damage varied from house to house but every house was damaged in some way. Before the war, many of the village houses had been made of thatch, so they easily caught fire from the bombing...After the war, everyone built houses of tin with corrugated iron roofing. Thatched hoses disappeared from the village. There was no road in the old village before the war. The villagers used the paths between the clan lands. The government decided it was a good time to construct a circular road that ran right round the whole village. It made some of the elders joke and say, "Thank God for the War; if it hadn't come to us, we would have never got this road." (p107, Kire, *Mari*)

A few months later, Rev Supplee came back to Kohima. As soon as he returned, he shifted the school into the abandoned hospital premises. He also repaired the hostel buildings below our lands and used them as schoolrooms. The hospital was shifted to the Serzou colony and built as a much bigger establishment.... The Misson School became a high school and was upgraded to include classes seven to ten. This was a big relief to many parents..(p112, Kire *Mari*).

Around the 13<sup>th</sup> century, a route was discovered in the remote outpost of the earth and this route was called Ledo road in India's North-East, bordering Arunachal Pradesh. Ahom documents like *Buranji* and *Shan* Chronicles of Burma provide



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elaborate information about this route. Donovan Webster states in this book “This road goes by many names- the Ledo road, the Uncle Sam highway, Pick’s Pike, the Man-a-Mile road and most famously Stillwell Road or the Burma Road. The whole road was rebuilt by the American general Joseph W. Stilwell, was not for human movement but for different purpose of carrying trucks loaded with coal to reach Kunming in China from Ledo, in January 1945. Some 139 engineers were killed by the Japanese. Diseases, drownings, crashes of supply planes and construction accidents claimed the lives of hundreds more. It was said without exaggeration that the road was built at the cost of a man a mile. 28,000 engineers and 35,000 native workers labored for two years to complete the Ledo-Burma road. The roads construction-along with the edges of 8,500 foot defiles, down steep gorges and across raging rapids in some of the world’s most penetrable jungles and it stands as one of the greatest engineering feats of World War II. Before the War was over, more than 5,000 vehicles would make trip, carrying 34,000 tons of vital supplies to China. (E.N Rammohan, 116)

However, during the post war period, this meandering path which connected their close neighbors of this region got truncated due to changed geopolitical realities and perspective and human contact also gradually reduced down to almost nothing. (Rakhee Bhattacharya, p.6, 13). Thus, this proved to be a major economic setback to North-east India. In the words of T. A Hussain: “Stillwell Road underscores the importance of North-east India as the possible Centre of economic resurgence. Reopening of the Stillwell Road will go a long way in opening up trans-border trade and solving insurgency problems of North-east India.” p.248.

### Displacement and Refugees Crisis

The Japanese invasion of the Tenasserim districts of Burma in 1941 resulted in exodus of Burmese Indians by sea via Calcutta and Chittagong. When dock facilities and obtaining a passage by sea became impossible, some Indians had left Southern Burma by the coastal belt between mountains and the sea and entered India via Cox Bazar and Chittagong after suffering great hardship on the way. But the real exodus of Indians and certain other non-Burmese on foot began after the fall of Rangoon early in March 1942, and continued passing through unknown tracks into Assam up to the end of June, a few even in July. Many refugees endured extreme hardships while passing through an unfriendly country; many died on the way of sickness and starvation and those that managed to reach India were also famished and in an extremely poor state of physical and mental health. They entered India from different gaps and oases in the hills on the eastern frontier of Assam but the most popular route chosen by them was through Tamu from where they went to Imphal via Palel. From Imphal they were taken to Dimapur where a camp had been established to look after them and send them to their various destinations in India.

Esterine Kire, in her novel *Mari* narrate the plight of these refugees... “it began with hordes of refugees that the Japanese invasion had pushed into our lands... they came in wretched bands; starving, diseased dregs of humanity, droves of them dropping down dead by the roadside or in the refugee camps... (17, *Mari*)

### Psychological Trauma

Mental health is an important facet of human capital with a significant impact on many aspects of human life. Yet, while the ‘tangible’ costs of wars through the impact on survivors are routinely assessed, evaluations of the psychological costs of wars, including those on mental health, are far scarce. Men, women, and children all experience acute trauma post conflict but to assume that the effects are homogenous across groups would be a flawed assessment. Women and children exposed to violence and brutalities of war are highly vulnerable to the effects of war causing severe psychological problems. Esterine Kire’s *Mari* also highlights such psychological impact on the survivors of the second world War, the geographical displacement, alienation, identity crisis, homelessness, rape, violence, torture took a humongous toll on the people of Kohima.

Authors note: *Mari*...is my mother’s eldest and this is her story. My mother is the youngest of four siblings. Samuel, the oldest, was the only son of my grandparents. He was followed a few years later by Mari, then came Zhabu, the second





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daughter, and last of all mama. The four of them were separated from their parents during the Japanese invasion of India Via the Naga Hills in 1944. Finally reunited at the end of the war, this is their story too.”p (viii) (*Mari*).

The pain of separation from their own family entails inscrutable pain and trauma for the survivors. Mari, leaving behind her British soldier lover while being pregnant with his child is one of the poignant scenes in the novel “Marigold! He said breathlessly. ‘Get ready quickly, there is no time. I am taking you and the whole family to Chieswema where you will be safe. You have to stay there for a few days until this madness is over.’ ... I felt numb. I had not been prepared for this parting from Vic. Nor had the seriousness of the war fully dawned on me until the frightening experience of the night before. Tears blinded me and none of what Vic was saying made sense. I was not afraid of the enemy or of gunfire. But I could not bear the thought of separation from Vic in the midst of such uncertainty. P (52,53) (*Mari*)

In one incident Sam is seen cropping his with a dao so that he would blend with the villagers. Sam and the young guys who went to school wore their hair like westerners, making them easy targets for the Japanese. The Japanese would identify them and force them to work as spies. Mari also did the same to disguise herself as a villager, she smeared ash on her face as well as over her whole body. P (58,59) *Mari*. Such were the atrocities of the Japanese. The indignity, hunger, loneliness took immense toll on their mental health.

Thus, the Second world war not only changed the socio-political, economic scenario of Kohima but also brought a tremendous change in the lives of the people of Kohima.

In authors words “*Mari* is not just Mari’s story. It is the story of Kohima and its people. Kohima today is very different from the Kohima of my childhood, and completely unrecognizable from the Kohima of Mari’s childhood. [...] [...] Once upon a time, a war was fought here and it changed lives. The lives of those who died. And those who lived, whose loved ones never returned, the ones who had to find within themselves the strength and courage to rebuild, to forgive, to love and to celebrate life again.” (Kire, xiii).

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