

Undercurrents of Socio-Political Turmoil in North East India Decoded through Literature: A Focused Study of Mari in the Context of North Eastern Literature and Regional Political Unrest

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ABSTRACT

The literature of North East India occupies a contested space where memory, trauma, and political contestation intersect. This paper reads Easterine Kire's *Mari* as a paradigmatic text for understanding how prolonged socio-political turmoil shapes everyday life in the region. Situating *Mari* within a comparative frame that engages Mamang Dai and Siddhartha Deb, the study uses postcolonial and subaltern theory—particularly the concepts of othering (Edward Said) and subalternity (Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak)—to examine how historical developments (colonial penetration, World War II, partition migrations, post-independence insurgency) affect the physical, emotional, social, cultural, and psychological lives of North East communities. The paper argues that Kire's close, diary-inflected narration offers a counter-archive: a civilian and feminine perspective that resists both colonial erasure and national silencing. Reading *Mari* along with Dai's folkloric recuperation and Deb's migrant realism demonstrates that North East fiction produces a multi-layered record of survival, fragmentation and resilience, and the fact that literature is indispensable when it comes to decoding the human behaviour in regional political turmoil.

Keywords: North East India, Easterine Kire, *Mari*, Othering, Subaltern, Trauma, Memory, Mamang Dai, Siddhartha Deb.

Introduction

North East India has long been represented in national discourse as a site of difference and disruption, its multiplicity of ethnicities and histories repeatedly framed as “problems” to be managed by the state. Such framing is often an effect of what Edward Said calls the production of the “other”: dominant discourses construct peripheral regions as objects of deficit in order to consolidate political authority (Said 93). In this optic, the North East becomes a repository of anxieties about territory, identity, and governance. Yet these dominant accounts frequently efface the lived realities of people who inhabit the region: civilians displaced by conflict; communities whose rituals are interrupted; women who shoulder domestic burdens during wartime and militarisation; migrants whose belonging is repeatedly contested.

Literature provides an essential corrective. Fiction from the North East tells us about the forms of experience that official histories or media narratives marginalise. Easterine Kire's *Mari*—a fictionalised rendering of a found diary from the Battle of Kohima (1944) is one such corrective narrative. Rather than focusing on strategic movements of armies or on heroic combatants, *Mari* centres around a young Naga woman's sensory, emotional, and domestic life during war. This focus enables readers to understand how political events affect private spaces and bodies, producing long-term psychological and cultural consequences. The present study reads *Mari* as a text that both reveals and resists processes of othering; it then situates Kire's novel among the works of Mamang Dai (whose *The Legends of Pensam* recuperates oral histories and folkloric epistemologies) and Siddhartha Deb (whose *The Point of Return* narrates the precariousness of migrant identity). Together, these authors furnish a literary framework of the region's turmoil.

This paper is organised as follows. First, the theoretical frame is outlined—othering and subalternity—and its relevance to North Eastern contexts. Next, a sustained close reading of *Mari*, exploring gendered marginality, trauma, memory, and the diary as counter-archive. Then the paper expands to include Mamang Dai and Siddhartha Deb, showing how their works complement and complicate Kire's representation of the region. Finally, the findings are synthesised and reflect on the broader implications for reading North East literature as testimony to long-standing political rupture.

Theoretical Framework: Othering and Subalternity

Two theoretical lenses clarify how fiction engages political marginality. Edward Said's *Orientalism* describes how cultural discourses produce knowledge about "the Orient" that serves imperial interests; this production of difference is both epistemic and political (Said 93). Applied to India's internal geographies, Said's insight helps explain how the North East has been constructed as "other" within the national imaginary: exotic in cultural representations, securitised in policy, and neglected in development. Said's work emphasises that othering functions not merely through overt violence but through the everyday practices of naming, mapping, and representation that justify domination.

Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak's interrogation of the subaltern "Can the subaltern speak?" extends Said by focusing on who is systematically denied access to representation even within decolonizing discourses (Spivak 271–88). For Spivak, subalternity is not simply voicelessness; it is a structural condition: the subaltern's testimony may be present yet remain unreadable or overwritten by dominant interpretive frameworks. Women, tribal groups, and migrants in the North East often occupy this status. Their voices might exist (diaries, oral histories, songs) but require careful translation outside hegemonic narratives to render legible the forms of experience and agency they embody.

These frameworks together suggest that to study North East fiction is to study the politics of voice and erasure. Fictional narratives like *Mari* function as counter-archives: they restore subaltern speech in forms that resist official appropriation and thus permit a diagnosis of the human consequences of political turmoil.

Easterine Kire's *Mari*: Diary, Othering, and the War that Inscribes Itself on Bodies and Homes

Easterine Kire's *Mari* is deceptively modest on the outside but profound in scope. The novel is structured around a found diary. Mari O'Leary's personal pages from the period of the Battle of Kohima—interspersed with later retrospective material that situates the diary's immediate impressions within the longer trajectory of memory. This formal choice renders *Mari* both intimate and testimonial: the private voice becomes a public document that insists upon being heard.

Diary as Counter-Archive

The diary form is politically generative. Private writing often preserves details that elude official accounts: the texture of daily scarcity, the small acts of solidarity among neighbors, the rituals that maintain a sense of self amid disorder. By making it Mari's diary, Kire elevates civilian testimony to an evidentiary status. The diary's straightforward entries, what some critics might call "small facts", accumulate into a rich ethnography of living under siege: shortages of food, the fear of shells at night, and the care to keep families alive. In this way, Kire's text answers Spivak's concern by offering a mechanism through which a subaltern woman's experiences can be mediated into a readable public form (Spivak 284–87). It is important, however, to recognise that translation into the public domain is itself fraught: the diary's initial silence, its placement in private hands, and the later authorial framing all raise questions about representation and voice. Kire negotiates these tensions by resisting voyeurism; the diary is presented with respect for the limitations of language in the face of trauma.

The Multiplicity of Othering

Mari makes visible several registers of othering. First, colonial militaries treat the Naga landscape and its inhabitants as context for strategic action rather than as communities with histories and private lives. This instrumental view reflects the classic Orientalist logic of reducing peoples to terrain. Second, Indian national historiography largely sidelines the North East's civilian experience in narratives of World War II and subsequent nation building; the war in Kohima rarely appears in mainstream curriculum as a civilian catastrophe (Said 93). Third, gender compounds marginalisation. Mari is doubly othered: as Naga and as a young woman whose mobility and agency are constrained by both customary expectations and wartime circumstances. Spivak's insight—about the special predicament of the subaltern woman—illuminates how Mari's silence is not absence but an enforced condition, a lack of avenue for public testimony (Spivak 287).

War as Sensory and Bodily Phenomenon

Kire's prose emphasises the sensory register of wartime experience: the sound of planes and bombs, the smell of smoke, the taste of rationed food. Trauma in *Mari* is not primarily an ideological abstraction; it is embodied. Mari's nights are described not as a set of historical coordinates but as a sequence of sensations and interrupted routines. The body, under this regime, is where political conflict first registers—through hunger, exhaustion, and fear. Kire's attention to these bodily details accords with trauma studies that emphasise non-linear memory and somatic recollection (Caruth). The body's memory persists when language falters.

Home, Displacement, and the Fragmented Social Fabric

Home in *Mari* is a fragile category. It shifts from sanctuary to target and, afterward, to an absence that must be grieved. The disintegration of domestic security extends into social networks: kinship relations are strained as people flee in different directions, and communal rituals that stabilise identity are suspended. Yet the narrative also indicates forms of resilience: women co-operate to prepare food, elders recite stories to preserve morale, and neighbors share scarce resources. Kire thus depicts trauma alongside networks of mutual care—social structures that sustain life beneath the headline of military maneuvers.

Love and Small Stakes as Human Currency

One of the novel's most powerful elements is how it frames love and ordinary domestic hopes as stakes of equal moral seriousness to strategic military objectives. The tender, ordinary gestures between Mari and her lover (his small gifts, shared confidences, plans for a modest future) are presented as the true measure of what war destroys. Kire thereby reframes the idea of victory: what matters is not only territory or battle outcomes but the capacity to imagine a future of ordinary human flourishing. This focus refuses grand narratives of heroism and replaces them with the ethical claim of civilian life.

Memory, Postmemory, and Generational Transmission

Kire's use of retrospective framing also invites analysis in terms of postmemory. The diary's contents do not evaporate with the event; they imprint subsequent generations. Testimonials and family stories become the source material for cultural memory, whether in the form of songs, recurring rituals, or quiet, transmitted fears. Memory's persistence demonstrates how political events shape subjectivity across time, creating intergenerational affects that condition social life long after hostilities have ceased.

Mamang Dai and Siddhartha Deb: Complementary Registers of Regional Experience

While Kire's *Mari* offers a civilian, feminine, and diaristic lens on wartime trauma, Mamang Dai and Siddhartha Deb approach the region's turmoil from similar vantage points: Dai through folkloric recuperation and community memory; Deb through migrant realism and the politics of belonging. Reading these works together yields a fuller picture of how socio-political events register across genres and lives.

Mamang Dai: Folklore, Environmental Ethics, and the Poetics of Continuity

Mamang Dai's fiction (notably *The Legends of Pensam*) emphasises oral tradition as the primary repository of communal knowledge and morality. Dai stages Pensam—a village whose name signifies liminality—as a cultural space where myth and history coexist. Her narrative strategy is to resist the homogenising tendencies of colonial and bureaucratic knowledge by centering indigenous beliefs and practices. This act of recuperation is not merely nostalgic: it functions as a political practice that asserts the legitimacy of tribal epistemologies against processes of dispossession (Dai 82).

Dai's characters live inside a world where land, ritual, and narrative are intertwined. When colonial patrols and modernising projects intrude, the disruption is not only economic but ontological: the symbolic maps by which people orient themselves become unreliable. Dai thus shows how political processes produce cultural erosion and psychic distress—anxieties that travel across generations. Her use of folklore is therefore a deliberate resistance to erasure: stories refuse absorption into the administrative categories the state prefers.

Dai's ecological sensibility also complements Kire's attention to bodily and domestic experience. Where Kire details how war breaks houses and hearts, Dai records how longer-term processes—development projects, missionary interventions, education systems—reshape relationships to land and memory. Both registers underscore that political turmoil is not only episodic but cumulative.

Siddhartha Deb: Migration, Statelessness, and the Everyday Politics of Belonging

Siddhartha Deb's *The Point of Return* addresses another form of marginality: migrant precarity. Deb's protagonists are Bengali communities whose historical migrations—partition related or economic—render them vulnerable to policies and discourses that define who belongs. Deb's realism highlights how citizenship and identity are materialised through documents, language use, and local networks. His characters experience the state as a presence that certifies belonging or produces dispossession. As Sanjib Baruah has argued, the politics of nationality in the North East often entails the production of internal outsiders whose very presence becomes contested (Baruah 75).

Deb's contribution lies in showing that marginality in the North East is multi-sourced: it is not only the product of colonial history or tribal displacement but also of demographic change, migration, and local identity politics. The emotional and psychological costs borne by migrant characters—uncertainty, shame, the sense of being perennially suspect—mirror the anxieties Kire and Dai register, though channeled through different social configurations.

Synthesis: What Fiction Reveals About Political Turmoil and Human Lives

The combined force of Kire, Dai, and Deb's fiction is to displace state-centric narratives of conflict and to replace them with truly lived experiences and accounts. Several synthetic observations follow:

- **Political events register first and most viscerally in bodies and homes.** Whether through bombs, patrols, or bureaucratic denial, the immediate site of suffering is domestic and somatic.
- **Memory operates as both wound and resource.** Diaries, oral stories, and family recollections preserve truth where archives omit it; they also transmit trauma.
- **Othring is multiply inflected.** The North East's marginality is racialised, regionalised, gendered, and procedural: policies and discourses together produce forms of exclusion.
- **Resistance is often quotidian.** Women's mutual aid, ritual survival, and private testimonies are political acts that sustain communities through long crises.
- **Genre matters.** Diary-based testimony (Kire), folkloric recuperation (Dai), and migrant realism (Deb) provide complementary epistemologies for knowing the region: testimonial truth, communal longevity, and bureaucratic precariousness.

Conclusion

Reading Easterine Kire's *Mari* in the company of Mamang Dai and Siddhartha Deb makes visible the layered, long-term effects of socio-political turmoil in North East India. Kire's diary-narrative provides a crucial corrective to military or national historiography by insisting on the civilian and feminine dimensions of wartime experience. Dai's recuperative folklore and Deb's migrant realism expand the frame, demonstrating that political rupture takes many forms and leaves traces across bodies, memories, and institutions. Together, these writers constitute a literary counter-archive that refuses to let the North East be legible only as an area of instability; instead, they insist that political conflict is best understood through its human consequences. To decode the region's undercurrents is therefore to attend to diaries, songs, stories, and the small acts that keep communities alive amid pressure—texts that demand to be read not as regional curiosities but as essential contributions to Indian and postcolonial literature.

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