

Exploring The Ambivalence of Tribal and Gender Narratives in Mamang Dai's *The Black Hill*

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Abstract:

Ecology as a component of sustenance of life is complex, multi layered and interconnected, where the author ideating from the space of being 'human', tries to emerge as ecologically responsible in the articulation of identity construction. It is in this context that the present paper seeks to analyse how Mamang Dai in her novel, *The Black Hill* envisages on the task of blurring out the ecological self and the other through her characters in a post-colonial context. Such ecological vision in Mamang Dai's work provides as a mouth-piece for her personal philosophy which is also entrenched in the mythical folklores of the Adi community. The novel has also highlighted the ideological enrapture of colonialism which resulted with the advent of Christianity and how this led to the change of the pagan culture. An attempt shall also be made to analyse the novel along the lines of deep ecology and the author's attempt to develop an 'ecosophy' of preserving the native tradition while living harmoniously with the intrinsic values of nature.

Keywords: ecology, folktale, myth, religion

Mamang Dai, a writer, former journalist and administrator equipped her writings within the historical stance of her ethnicity encompassing the region of 'North-east' India while grappling with the ideas of 'home', 'belonging' and 'identity'. She belonged to the Adi community of Arunachal Pradesh which provided the resources of her intimate experience to embark on the role of a 'cultural historian' in order to protect and preserve the heritage and legacy of the folktales which were slowly erasing within the grains of memory as these accounts were mostly recorded orally. It is crucial to note how she subverted the colonial efforts to administer the region as a frontier for propagating its discourse on religion and civilization in terms of the dichotomy between margin versus mainland. The novel, *The Black Hill* (2014), revolves around the characters of Gimur, Kajinsha and Father Nicholas Krik and how their lives had impactful changes with the advent of the Migluns (British) and the spread of colonialism. However, it is important to note how the personal narratives of these characters were foregrounded as they intermingled within their internal strives to protect their borders and boundaries. In this context it is important to note the consciousness of deep ecology embedded within the narrative since the very beginning highlighting the existence of an ecological conscience and reflects a conviction of symbiotic well-being of both nature and the human beings. According to Arne Naess, who believed in the need of an ethnic recourse rather than a mere recourse to human ethics described deep ecology as:

- (1) The well-being and flourishing of human and non-human Life on Earth have value in themselves. These values are independent of the usefulness of the non-human world for human purposes.
- (2)

Richness and diversity of life forms contribute to the realization of these values and are also values in themselves. (Naess 14)

Gimur's life is a reflection of the nature around her which can be witnessed throughout the novel—in the first part of the novel when she led a carefree life, nature claims similarity in the description of her inward transformation:

It was a cold day, her mother had said, but red flowers were ablaze on the beautiful tagat—coral tree. The tall and thorny tagats that surround the village are in bloom again, and Gimur has to rear up to look beyond the treetops. In the last light of the sun, she is a sculpted silhouette poised on a rock at the edge of the hill. (Dai 9)

The mutual dependency can also be traced when she decided to leave Kajinsha behind, lost her infant boy who died after soaking in rain and buried him in the forest and continued her journey back to Mebo with Awesa. Mamang Dai vividly outlined the indescribable pain of a mother losing her child paralleled with the formidable journey she had to undertake in nature's boughs:

The stars came out and still Gimur and Awesa did not stir, as if they were still waiting for Siengbow to wake up. A small fire burned silently and they heard a herd of elephants moving in the dark trees. Perhaps they will come here and find us, thought Gimur. She could not bring her mind back from where it had gone, into a bitter, endless space. She rocked back and forth all night listening to the elephants' trampling trees in the forest and she wanted to be with them, to huddle together and remain forever with that big, strong herd on their ancient route patiently, tenderly, loving the bones of the dead. (Dai 127)

The elements of folktales and myths within the narrative provides a discourse of awareness to the community's socio-political needs and how the linguistic documentation reflects the transition from oral to written literature. Mitra Phukan, in her essay "Writing in English in the North-east" (2013) argued that writers from north-east exhibit a kind of ease in deforming the English language as they are evolving from oral to written tradition without the mediation of another language; "diverse experiences of Mamang Dai and Temsula Ao, and the cultures they write from inevitably shape the vocabulary, the cadences, even the sentence structures of their work, because of the different languages they call their Mother Tongue" (Phukan 2013).

Mamang Dai's description of the ecological elements in the novel is an inkling of the symbiotic relationship that the characters share with nature. It is also an echo of her Adi consciousness and memory of her ancestral spirits which were shrouded in mystery and enigma similar to the distant mountains. The novel's recurring symbolism of the mountains stood for the preservation of one's heritage and territory. Gimur's elders didn't want the Migluns to intervene their ways and so decided to meet them down the hills instead of showing the way to their territory. However, Krick was able to surpass the arduous borders of the terrain to carry out his mission:

In those final March days Gimur was entering a realm from which there was no turning back. The arrival of the priest had changed the landscape. How could he have climbed these mountains? He had legs the colour of ivory, she had seen them once when he was crossing a stream and he had pulled up his robe, and his trousers underneath, a little. The man was always dressed in a black robe except for the time on the hill when Kajinsha had befriended him and they had shared food, water, salt. Then she had seen him wrapped in a long, grey coat as if to hide his hunger and weakness. In Mebo, now, she watched him slyly. He was surrounded by her people and he was washing their sores, wiping away blood and pus and dressing their injured flesh with cloth. His

eyes were downcast and his face was white and pointed at the chin where it was covered by a full beard. (Dai 140)

The notion of ‘ecological self’ is crucial to form a concrete understanding of the constitutive relationship of the self with nature. It also imbibes the value of self-realisation that any harm done to the natural world will have serious consequences. In the prose poem, “The Deification of Nature”, Dai reveals her Adi consciousness of ecological self and the need to value other lives:

When we say our people believe that rocks and trees have life, what does it mean?

In this environment where we live and what we call our land, land of our ancestors, we cannot crush the mountains or tear off the green covering

saying this is what is getting in the way of development. (Dai 53)

The mission of Krick’s religious ideals influenced Lendham’s firm views on life who was touched by the priest and his songs. When Gimur was resolute to marry Kajinsha, he was threatened by her decision to move out of her community but his rigidity was softened by Krick’s teachings and was ready to venture into the exploration of the new religion. Gimur felt that they had finally exchanged places as he eagerly welcomed the changes to banish fear from the people of the ‘dark hills’:

‘We can sing new songs,’ said Lendem. ‘Our miri, padari and his cross, the miglun gods, there is no contest here. All gods are equally powerful. And if there is a contest among gods than let it be their contest,’ he said. ‘What about our rituals? Are you giving up our beliefs?’ she asked him. Lendem was genuinely shocked. ‘Hai! What do you mean? I might as well let the blood drain from my body than say I give up our beliefs. How can I be anyone but the way I was born? I believe in our gods as much as the miglun does in his. I am only examining some things in order to know more. One day our children will ask us, what is this belief, who created it? (Dai 149)

The above incident of Lendham, has repercussions of Nwoye’s conversion to Christianity in Chinua Achebe’s *Things Fall Apart*, where he too was affected by the songs of the missionary as the rigidity of his father’s norms, the death of Ikemefuna and the frailty of the Igbo culture suffocated him:

But there was a young lad who had been captivated. His name was Nwoye, Okonkwo’s first son. It was not the mad logic of the Trinity that captivated him. He did not understand it. It was the poetry of the new religion, something felt in the marrow. The hymn about brothers who sat in the darkness and in fear seemed to answer a vague and persistent question that haunted his young soul - the question of the twins crying in the bush and the questions of Ikemefuna who was killed. He felt a relief within as the hymn poured into his parched soul. The words of the hymn were like drops of frozen rain melting on the dry palate of the panting earth. Nwoye’s callow mind was greatly. (Achebe 104)

Besides the Mebo tribe of Gimur, Dai presents the origin and settlements of the Mishmi tribe of Kajinsha who led an isolated life, one with nature. The opposition of the British intervention of Kajinsha’s tribesmen is rooted in the deep ecological notion of opposing the anthropocentric idea of development at the cost of environmental degradation as the ethnic spirituality of these people are ingrained in the forests:

Kajinsha had been born in a village beyond the Dau River in the Mishmee Hills. The village is no longer in existence and even back then it had been a nameless settlement not recorded on any map. What was a village in those days but a house or two, a family- father, mother, children and a few clan members? If they moved, that was the end of their village. In the 1800s what was known

as the Mishmee Hills was a sparsely populated region of towering mountains and swift flowing rivers where three great clans of the Mishmee tribe lived. However, the people of Mishmee country called themselves the Kmaan, Taraon and Idu people and the term ‘Mishmee’ was an alien word to them. If anyone had asked Kajinsha who he was he would have said he was Kmaan, distinct from the Taraon whom the Kmaan knew as Tah-wrah or Chimmu, and the Idu clans whom they called Mindow and who occupied the territories further south and northwest. (Dai 13)

It can be seen that Mamang Dai constantly delves into the social and political situatedness of the characters thereby affirming her own role as a writer of Northeast and navigating the “inviolable space” of her cultural heritage within the ‘black hills’ of inconsistent history woven around ecological consciousness and co-existence with the natural world. Gimur contemplates her life within the terrain of nature throughout the novel and even towards the end when Kajinsha is killed for a falsely accused murder, her final oneness with nature glowers her Ecospiritual healing as she reunites with Kajinsha’s spirit culminating into the climax of Gimur’s journey of her soul:

She remembered the look in Kajinsha’s eyes. That, she knew, was his soul. Her soul and Kajinsha’s had connected the moment the fierce gaze of those eyes had touched her when they first looked at each other. It was a movement, a cry, a fastening of untold strength. Now nothing on earth could destroy it. It could not be untied, not even by death, for what was death? Who died? No, nothing had ended. She stretched her legs out straight in front of her. The hillside was cold. The ground seemed to tremble beneath her body. She gazed up at the sky. In the gathering darkness a smile stretched her pale face. (Dai 219)

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