

An Eco Spiritual Perspective of Mamang Dai's Selected Works

Dr. Ananya Dash

Assistant Professor, Department of English, School of Liberal Arts, ASBM University, Bhubaneswar, Odisha

ABSTRACT

Ecocritical discourse is mainly foregrounded upon the study of literature in close relation to ecology and environment. In the recent times, ecologists have found out various theories such as eco-sophy, deep ecology, eco-spirituality etc., to overcome the eco-crisis and environmental problems. As such, the concept of ecospirituality implies to a spiritual connection apparent between man and the environment. It has its inception within the Gaia hypothesis which means a complex entity involving the earth's biosphere, oceans and soil; the totality establishing a cybernetic system which seeks a chemical environment for life on this planet. The North Eastern region of India has so far produced literary works which demonstrates the idea that the interdependence between human beings and nature has always been holistic in a way that the people internalize spiritual values and practices very well. The ethnography, the land and the tribal folks are inseparable to each other thereby establishing the spiritual ecosystem of the region. Mamang Dai, a renowned poet of Arunachal Pradesh no doubt has carved a niche through her incredible work in the mainstream Indian literature. Her work reflects a panorama of the artistic representation of her homeland, the religious beliefs and tradition; she champions for the nature-based spirituality with divinity situated in this world which all the most reflects her socio-ethic sensibilities respectively.

In the light of the above observation, the present paper attempts to examine the prominent works of Mamang Dai (The Legends of Pensam, The Black Hill, and Stupid Cupid) from an eco-spiritual perspective.

Keywords: Ecocriticism, Eco-Spirituality, North East, Ethnicity, Nature

Introduction

Together with Ecology and Environment, Eco-criticism has been a subject of engaging interest for scholars and ecologists that has extended over a significant number of years. One cannot deny the fact that eco-critical study is basically based on the study of literature in close relation to ecology and environment, and that its primary purpose is to reclaim/restore the amicable relationship between human and environment. The onus lies in restoring a healthy ecosystem that thrives on an organic interconnectedness between human and Nature/environment on one hand, and biotic and abiotic elements on the other. The living organisms in the surrounding maintain a network working together thereby forming an absolute concord between the human and non-human world, but man has struck a discordant note by cutting his umbilical cord with his life supporting systems. Undoubtedly, civilization, with its materialistic predisposition has taken man away from nature distorting his collective perception and

vision finally turning him into a predator. His quenchless greed has terribly driven him hard to plunder wealth and power intentionally without thinking for a while, the result of the pursuit. In doing so, man has failed miserably to observe the collapse of the world, precisely because of his ruthless passion for power and grandeur. Unfortunately, this very significant symbiotic relationship has been severely affected in the context of Industrialization, rapid advancement in terms of science and technology and mushroom growth in human population that intensify deforestation, destruction and loss of pastoral landscape causing thereby global warming, seasonal and climatic changes and environmental pollution. While being jolted by ego consciousness and anthropocentric attitude, man has pushed himself to the centre, thereby causing an imbalance in the ecosystem in the backdrop of colonialism, globalization and mercantilism

In the aftermath of Enlightenment and Industrialization, man has become an increasingly egocentric, utilitarian and profit oriented mechanical being. With the galloping growth in population, advancement in science and technology, the whole world has faced grave environmental crisis in form of global warming, nuclear wastage dumping, toxic waste contamination, overconsumption, and rapid reduction of natural resources. With the high-speed exposure of the industrial enterprise and technology, jeopardizing the natural ecosystem and biodiversity, it has become an ominous challenge for the ecologists and environmentalists to influence human species so that they appreciate their drive to shelter and preserve environment for the existence of eco-friendly stability/harmony. A sense of urgency to restore the damage done to the earth was felt by many ecologists, ecocritics and environmentalists who tended to evolve an interdisciplinary approach, by amalgamating ecology, ecopsychology, eco-spirituality, deep ecologist, and literature with emphasis on the literary constructions/representation of nature and environmental crisis in eco-literary discourses. Ecocriticism, as a literary theory addresses the sensibilities and relationship between human, nature and the surrounding establishing the idea regarding how environmental issues and nature is embodied in the literary discourses. Cheryll (1996) defined Eco Criticism as:

What then is ecocriticism? Simply, put, ecocriticism is the study of the relationship between literature and physical environment. Just as feminist criticism examines language and literature from a gender-conscious perspective, and Marxist criticism brings an awareness of modes of production and economic class to its reading of texts, ecocriticism takes an earth-centred approach to literary studies.

As an emerging field, Eco spirituality stresses on the sacred ritual of merging with the living world and the world based on regard, kindness and an thorough knowledge that all living things are interconnected. It includes living in agreement and having a sacrosanct relationship with the soil and its animals. It is frequently said that we live in the most perilous times in the history of humankind; climate change, natural debasement, and political and financial distress have compelled us to see at our relationship with the world, where nothing we do happens outside it. As we proceed to see the developing impacts of climate change, we have ended up more mindful of ourselves in connection to the world at large. However, the awareness of our relationship with the world is not necessarily making the world a better place. It has driven to a sense of respect, lowliness which is not sufficient. We require to bring a moral and political measurement to our relationship with the earth, for if it is sacrosanct, at that point we owe our regard and require to take positive activity, due to our practice of the virtues of hospitality and wisdom. Eco-spirituality is an approach to life that advocates a harmonious coexistence with the environment. In order to practice eco-spirituality, one must have profound regard for all living creatures, whether creature or plant. The objective of the eco-spiritualist is to thrive that is feasible and in so doing,

to pay back to the earth in relationship to what we take and this implies not to harm or exploit nature and work to ensure that they leave the planet in a well-functioning condition than they found it. While eco-spirituality focuses on the living beings of the earth, nothing lives without a conducive environment, so care for the land, bodies of water, and the purity, the air are also connected. Some Eco-spiritualists call themselves “deep ecologists” because they believe that the world’s ecological problems are due to how humans think and behave. They believe the world will be healed when humans realize and accept that we are all connected to nature through consciousness. A Spiritual approach to the environment can be traced to the earliest days of the environmental movement. The idea was that humans and the environment were the same and that all living beings were spiritually connected. The roots of eco-spirituality can be found in ancient indigenous cultures which often had a profound spiritual connection to the land they inhabited. Ancient cultures all practice what we now call spirituality; this is partly caused by the eradication of any indigenous traditions worldwide. However, in recent decades, there seems to have a growing interest in eco-spirituality, as an increasing number of people seek for ways to lead a sustainable and environmentally conscious life, especially when facing an impending climate collapse. And especially for those who practice eco-spirituality, it is very often viewed as a form to connect with the supreme energy that inhabits within all living organisms. There are multiple ways to practice eco-spirituality, some common themes include connecting with nature through meditation or prayer, honoring the cycles of the seasons, and respecting all forms of life. Eco-spiritualists may also choose to live simple life in harmony with the earth and to avoid damaging or polluting the natural world. By following these practices, eco-spiritualists hope to create a more sustainable and an amicable with the green planet.

From an eco-spiritual perspective, ultimate reality, God, spirit, and the divine is not only the source of creation, but also an ongoing part of creation, a part with which one constantly interact using one’s senses and intuitions and from such interactions and experiences acquire an oceanic perception into the wonder of reality. The challenge of eco-spirituality is to discover God within – not apart from – this totality, and to view the totality as dynamic and interdependent that refers to, to find our relationship with the entire cosmos, with God as the center and creator of this master piece. Basically, the concept of eco-spiritualism constitutes an ancient and primordial practice in India and precisely nature has been revered as the most powerful creation through festivals, ceremonies, rituals, prayers remarkably. It’s significance dates back to the ancient human civilization probably since Vedic and Puranic Age where nature occupied the centre stage in performing all religious rituals by the indigenous people. As Albert Fritsch S.J maintains that “Eco-spirituality is based on 'the laws of ecology and must be spiritually uplifting by exhibiting glory in the goodness of creation'. In “Ignatian” vein eco-spiritualism finds profound subtlety in the divine architecture of nature, and develops the understanding that nature is simply divine because the “spiritual energy” being coupled with “material principles” of the earth gets expressive in all forms of life (Berry 69-71 2009).

With regards to this, the stream of overflowing lyrics and writings from the Northeast India, especially novels have attained worldwide popularity and found a distinct voice in the platform of Indian Writing in English and in the larger platform of World Literature. Amidst this, Mamang Dai, an eminent poet, from Arunachal Pradesh holds a distinct voice among the contemporary poets of the North-east India Writing in English. Her poetry vividly expresses the myriad perspective of her land’s ecology, mystery and myths, rich biodiversity, glorious heritage and eco-spiritual sensibilities, providing a glimpse on the

ecocritical critique, awareness of bio-centric defence as well as anthropocene oppression thereby promoting eco-consciousness or earth centred approach.

Northeast literature as such is foregrounded upon the discourse of identity and self-expression, which was well formulated by writers through this corpus of writing that took shape in 1980's and 90's. As the colonial advent barges into, along with the ethnographic representation in the North-East literature, the writers took to pen, describing their culture, ethnicity, identity, emotions and feelings in their literary works. Many prominent writers from the north east incorporated ecology in their works to create an identity which is unique and powerful in shaping their roots. The different states ranging in diverse traditions and culture, language and religion has some common ground in establishing values and concerns of writers where they celebrate the ecological glory and sensibilities of the Northeast, spreading an innate ecological awareness. Northeast literature offers a diverse range of ecocritical analysis for examining the proper connection between man, nature and the place of nature in the material world. The concern for nature is amplified through the medium of northeast poetry. It offers a glimpse of the richness of ecological sensibilities, promoting ecological consciousness. With abundant nature imageries, almost all poems of north east are refreshing, rich and unique. Nature exists with all its brilliance in northeast poetry where it expresses more prominently of an expression of one's individuality and roots. In an eco-spiritual sphere, the wilderness becomes a open space of healing and meditation wherein a representative recognizes his self and understands the holistic perspective of ecological sensibilities. By providing animation and living attributes to inanimate objects and nature, literature glorifies the rich natural ecology and perceives the ethical problem of the rising anthropocene greed and corruption. There is a plethora of elements within Eco-spirituality, and the priorities are divergent- some challenges and belief that humans are the center of life, otherwise known as anthropocentrism, while others propose a bio-centric approach wherein the intrinsic value of animals, plants, rivers, and mountains has a priority over their instrumental value as resources for humans.

As an innate naturalist, Dai's work presents an uninterrupted beauty and peacefulness of nature. She reflects on the deteriorating alliance of man and nature, bearing in mind the capitalist greed and consumerism although the northeast possesses a transfixing and luminous beauty of nature and the simplicity of people living in natural environment. Elements of paganism of northeast offer a unit of analysis between human beings and nature that advocates an ecology-based religion to promote the ecological sensibilities and interconnectedness among all living beings.

Eco theologian Thomas Berry suggested that there is an ardent need for meaning, purpose and fulfilment related to our present ecological crisis precisely because the indigenous people did have a complete and thorough understanding that our relationship to the Earth is both spiritually and physically nurturing. A bio-centric approach is often included in the indigenous native's approach of life which is expressed through their rituals and prayers. Dai in most of her poems, makes extensive use of metaphors to portray lofty mountains and streams that play a spiritual role in the rich culture of Arunachal Pradesh. Reflecting on the rich tribal heritage of her homeland, the inhabitants of Arunachal who believe in spirits of the jungle, rivers, and forests as roots of their identity, she writes:

The History of our race begins with the place of stories
We do not know if the language we speak belongs to a written past
Nothing is certain
There are Mountains, Oh! There are Mountains We climbed every slope,

we slept by the river

But we do not speak of victory yet! (An Obscure Place)

The very significant spiritual & cultural practices called the Pahari practices in Dai's book *The Legends of Pensam* deserves special mention precisely because of its scientific description of honouring tribal spirituality. The prologue itself reinforces the utmost generosity of the Adi tribe which says, "I was born in the mountains, in a village where boys kicked rocks around pretending at football (Dai, 2006, p3). This very line assesses a deep awareness of one's Eco spiritual relationship which the Adis have incorporated within them.

Like the majority of tribes inhabiting the central belt of Arunachal, the Adis Practice an animistic faith that is woven around forest ecology and co-existence with the natural world. (Dai, 2006, 1)

The tribal beliefs were guided along with, shaped by mythical thinking, intuitive thoughts of their union with nature and their culture are even loaded with mountain rituals and shamanic rituals. And within the backdrop of North-East India, the rise of shaktism or tantrism out of the local shamanistic religions of the Indo-Mongoloids has been widely acknowledged by scholars (Bhagabati 1998: 1). In this regard, Stirn and Van Ham opines that, "By instituting the shaman, the North-eastern people created an expert who have the ability to build right contact with spiritual beings. This becomes necessary when an imbalance arise in the world. Such shamanistic insight into the world's interrelations and the ability to make open contact with these forces distinguishes man from his fellow earthly creatures"(2000: 95). In the context of Arunachal Pradesh, which stands as an obvious example of religious syncretism, shamanism still plays a very important role among the Adi tribe, which Dai has beautifully articulated in her book "The Legends of Pensam" that brings out the strong belief of tribal clans in the unfailing effects of these rituals. For Instance: The water Serpent Biribik stands as an incarnation of all spirits and the whole in the Adi tribe believes whenever a strange appearance is observed in the river, it is indicated that something bad is certainly going to happen in the village. Then an ancient Serpent ritual is performed to heal and cure the sufferings and this theme is replicated throughout the book.

Dai opines that one should preserve nature and live in harmony with other beings to maintain the ecological equilibrium. But the evils of anthropocentrism have given rise to mass destruction and emergence of a defiled world where capitalism sits on a throne ushering the advent of consumerism and commoditized goods, where the ecological welfare lie eclipsed in some distant land. Since northeast people are closely related to nature, such destruction of natural resources brings distortion to their identities rooted so profound in the indigenous soil. She laments the significant damage to the foliage and wildlife of the north-eastern land as marker of the anthropocene corruption through an incursion of the outsiders, who spread the seeds of westernization corrupting their rich tribal values and ways of living:

The other day a young man arrived from the village because he could not speak, he brought a gift of fish from the land of rivers

it seems such acts are repeated

we live in territories forever ancient and new and as we speak in changing languages

I also leave my spear learning by the tree

And try to make a sign. (The Voice of the Mountain)

Eco-spirituality also offers a comprehensive context for rethinking our current situation and for understanding ourselves as part of a greater evolutionary whole that is both spiritual and conscious. But how, being withdrawn from nature leads to a spiritual degeneration ring with utter sadness in her works *Stupid Cupid* where she unveils how egocentric attitude, and modern capitalism influenced by anthropocene ideals split the human-Nature relationship. When Adna, an indigenous woman from North East ventures into a new world of modernism in New Delhi for a more advanced and fulfilling life, she gets entangled in various strings attached to the material pursuit.

She confesses, "though my home was in the hills, I was city bred, and things happened" (Dai, 2009, 3).

The first catch for her is an extramarital affair with a married man which completely blindfolds her moral vision. She thinks as long as a relationship is based on true love it cannot be held as adultery. Soon she knows that her aunt has bequeathed her a bungalow. The second catch for her is her decision to turn that estate into a guest house where couples and pairs can spend time without being interrogated about their relationship status. This she precisely does so that she has no problem in having her "current beau" (Dai, 2009, p.3) with her at any point of time. The place quickly turns into a hub of clandestine affairs and illicit relationships. Thus, in *Adna* we see how alienation from Nature precipitates spiritual degeneration.

A question Adna keeps asking in her heart of hearts embarks her on a spiritual quest: "Everyone is looking to rediscover something. But... what?" (Dai, 2009, p.2). She keeps wondering what it is which is "bigger, better, brighter" and "purer" (Dai, 2009, p.2). What is perfectly alright for her physiological self begins to disturb her mentally. Her so called "love nest" suffocates her so much that she confesses, "Despite all the liberal talk, I couldn't bring myself to live permanently in the love nest and so with Amine's help I had found a rented apartment close to where she lived." (Dai, 2009, p.3)

The pivotal point of *Adna's* soul searching is the moment she knows the reason why and in which circumstances her aunt died leaving her property to Adna. She comes to a realization that there are lot of similarities between her aunt's life and her own life and she now dreads the kind of ending her aunt's life had. When she finally perceives that her homeland is calling her she responds to the call and a radical atheist now turns into a devotee of Nature by regaining the lost connections with her spiritual roots.

In the final pages, Dai beautifully portrays this spiritual awareness. It is as if spiritual essence is endowed to the hills:

The lights on the hill were coming on one by one and as if to compete with them, more fireflies began to gleam on their secret errands... Looking up I saw the prayer flags on the green hill. They were so tall they halted the wind. The wind stopped, listened and moved on. Perhaps there are more gods and goddesses standing all around us than we will ever know... Otherwise why would our souls rise up like birds and fly away with the sound of prayer bells tinkling across the Himalayas? (Dai 2014, 155)

Man-Nature interface illuminates the consciousness. The various physical bodies of nature, be it the sea or the river, the tree or the mountain, when it connects spiritually with a human being, self-awareness deepens. Arup Pal has shown in one of his articles how "spiritual well-being comes after the sublime understanding when the height's physical buoyancy interacts with the human soul" (Pal, 2000, 11).

Dai's hill motif, which appears in tales after tales, emerges as a prototype of her imaginary ecosystem. The hill has the natural vigour of an altitude that can transform anything corporal into celestial, transient into everlasting and anything mundane into divine. Mamang Dai's *The Black Hill* opens and closes with

Gimur, the central character standing on the hill. The book recounts Gimur's journey or rather the journey of her soul. Kajinsha, a tribal youth, who has a mind of his own is the other major character of the novel. The third character is Father Nicolas Krick, a non-tribal character who is a Christian missionary. He arrives on the hills to spread the Gospel and targets Tibet through Assam. Historically, the book marks the emergence of Christian religiosity on the pagan soil. The book a complex narrative which lets at one point to ponder that Kajinsha has probably killed the Priest whose preaching is assumed to be a threat to the Pagan faith or the tribal spiritualism, but in reality, he has not committed the crime. Kajinsha eventually is accused of the murder which he did not commit at all and hence is killed in within the confinement of four walls, leaving Gimur behind with her sense of loss.

Throughout the book, Gimur is often seen contemplating nature, experiencing oneness with the hill and the forest. In the final pages of the novel, we get to witness her ecospiritual healing and a much-needed spiritual stretching:

The sky above shone with a soft, clear light. She could inhale the grandeur of the sky...Her soul was returning to her. Beyond this spot the true forest would begin....She gazed up at the sky. In the gathering darkness a smile stretched her pale face. (Dai, 2014, p.288)

Her smile is the sign of her spiritual reunion with Kajinsha, her lover. An epic spiritual journey thus culminates in a spiritual expansion delineated in the closing lines of the novel: "The gods are bystanders. And I am earth and Kajinsha is the sky and we have looked at each other and will look at each other like this for a million years" (Dai, 2017, p.289). This is a reference to the myth of the Sky and the Earth as creative principles. As recorded by Verrier Elwin, there are multiple myths of the Earth and the Sky, at least two of which deserves a special mention in this context is noted here:

At first, there was no earth and sky: there were only two great eggs. But they were not ordinary eggs...From one came the Earth, from the other the Sky, her husband. Now the Earth was too big for the Sky to hold in his arms... The Earth... made herself paliable and the mountains and valleys were formed... When the Sky made love to Earth, every kind of tree and grass and all living creatures came into being" (Elwin, 2017, pp.15-16).

Elwin, concludes the second myth of sky by saying,

The Earth and Sky are lovers...but the lovers must be separated, for so long as they cling together, there is nowhere for their children to live. In a Minyong tradition, after their separation, The Earth always longed to return to her husband to be one with him again. (Elwin, 2017, p.xxi)

Conclusion

To sum up, Mamang Dai observes nature as a dynamic force that plays a vital role in shaping ecological consciousness of the readers. As the concepts of animism and eco-spirituality is visibly seen in Dai's poetry, she however, aimed to exert effort on the multidimensional aspects of ecology in her poetry. The idea of ecospiritualism is a powerful one hence undergoing change from time to time with newer perspectives added even with a slight change in the bio-socio-cultural milieu. There has been a significant shift in the anthropocentric emphasis on "ecology" to a bio-centric stress on "deep ecology" and from "deep ecology" to "radical environmentalism" demanding attention and involvement of creative writers to communicate through their works that

This earth is our home and our creator.... The mountains, the seas, the endless prairie, the grasslands, the wetlands, the deserts and rainforests are all infinitely precious, both manifesting and partially

constituting a proper object of religious concern. From this perspective, current human practices toward nature are a sacrilege - a gross irreverence toward this hallowed place. (Hettinger, 1995, p.94)

Through the theory of eco-spirituality, Dai anticipated to work on the heterogeneous aspects of ecology in her works. If her engagement with the spiritual aspects of her cultural heritage along with the theme of nature in her works continues, she can further explore the varied forms of ecospiritualism experienced not just in her immediate ecospiritual space but in the broader and more universal ecosphere, perhaps alleviating the subjectivity, and limited significance of her fiction with the larger canvas of the ecospiritual framework.

WORKS CITED

Primary sources

1. Dai, Mamang. *The Legends of Pensam*, New Delhi: Penguin, 2006.
2. *Stupid Cupid*. Gurgaon: Random House, 2009
3. *The Black Hill*. New Delhi: Rupa Publications, 2014

Secondary Sources

1. Berry, Thomas and Thomas Clarke. *Befriending the Earth: A Theology of Reconciliation Between Humans and the Earth*, eds. Stephen Dunn and Anne Lonergan. Mystic, Connecticut: Twenty-third Publication, 1991.
2. *The Sacred Universe: Earth, Spirituality and Religion in the Twenty first Century*. Colombia University Press, 2009.
3. Bhagabati, A.C. *Indigenous faith and customs some observations*. In M. C. Bhera et al. (eds.). *Indigenous faith and practices of the tribes Arunachal Pradesh*. New Delhi: Himalayan Publishers. 1998.
4. Bhuyan, Dikshita. "Ecological Concerns of Mamang Dai: A Study of River Poems." *CLIO An Interdisciplinary Journal*. 6(9), 125-131. 2020.
5. Devi, Khumanthen & Laishram, Sangeeta. "Ecology, Myth and Mystery: a Study of Select Poems of Mamang Dai and Temsula Ao." *Research Review International Journal of Multidisciplinary*. 4(5), 1484-1487. 2019.
6. Glotfelty, Cheryl, and Harold Fromm, editors. *The Ecocritical Reader: Landmarks in Literary Ecology*. The U of Georgia P, 1996.
7. Hettinger, Ned. "Ecospirituality: First Thoughts." *Dialogue & Alliance* 9, no.2 Fall-Winter. http://hettingern.people.cofc.edu/Hettinger_Ecospirituality.pdf. pp. 81-98. 1995.
8. Stirn, A. and P. Van Ham. *The Seven Sisters of India*. Ahmedabad: Mapin Publishing. 2000.
9. Taylor, Bron. "Earth and Nature-Based Spirituality (Part I): From Deep Ecology to Radical Environmentalism". *Religion*. 31, 175-193. 2001.