

The ‘Other’ in Mamang Dai’s *Stupid Cupid*

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Abstract

The northeast India is home to many ethnic groups with a rich tradition of oral, and in some cases written forms. Though the northeastern states are late bloomers in the Indian literature, in recent years there has been a considerable boom in north east fiction writings which are reflections of self, identity construction, issues on family and society. The paper proposes a feminist reading of Mamang Dai’s novel *Stupid Cupid*, inspired by the concept of ‘Other’ through two aspects. The first, as a woman in the patriarchal society and the second concerns the notion of ‘Other’ between the northeasterners and the mainlanders. The paper also tries to explore the themes of self and alienation in relation to the personal experiences faced by different individuals in the novel.

Keywords: Other, Self, Alienation, female sexuality, Marginalization

INTRODUCTION

Mamang Dai is one of the prominent literary figures from Arunachal Pradesh. Usually writing about the land, people, culture, their lores and stories, she captures the essence of the state in her writings. However, *Stupid Cupid* is a novel set against an urban backdrop. Though there are reflections of the age old hills where-to the native mind occasionally wanders, in its longing for home and likeness, the novel largely situates the characters in the city, where there is multicultural assimilation and at times identity conflicts.

In a way *Stupid cupid* is a woman-centric novel. All the loud characters are that of women. The author places her women characters in the foreground. They are independent working women, outspoken and bold, ready to revolt against the conventional norms of society and fight their ways through all the hurdles in pursuit of happiness. And in the process they place themselves in vulnerable positions in society, love and relationships. “The patterns of journey, quest, and exile are especially relevant in the search for a new identity” (Chang, p.3).

Literature Review

Understanding and realizing the self is essential for growth and change, in order to understand the world around us better and our place in that world. Delving deeper into one’s conscious is necessary to understand the self. Literature is said to be portrayal of life. But for years the self, the conscious, the individual was not focused heavily upon. As Desai (1971) asserts that the slow transition from the outside world to the inner world of the person is a significant stage in the development of fiction in India and other countries. Instead of holding up a mirror of society, the emphasis of interest is on depicting mental experiences. Fiction writers like Dai try to explore the inner space of an individual.

Dai’s female characters are seen to assert their rights on their bodies. Jasbir Jain (2002) opines that in a

patriarchal society the female body is controlled by the patriarchal morality and a woman's worth and status by the roles of wifehood and motherhood. According to her when women writers write about their bodies it is a negotiation for the space to establish their right to ownership.

In the efforts to find the self, the sense of alienation elevates at some point. At such times we seek to find some similarities in the 'other' to find a sense of belonging. As mentioned by Marc Auge (1998) that the distance between two individuals get reduced to some extent when in contact with a much wider different entity. This embrace of distinction and affinity is seen in Adna and Green's relationship. Both being from northeast India. Their friendly acquaintance results from their similar sense of alienation in the capital city, Delhi.

Methodology

Employing a qualitative approach, the paper examines themes of other, self, alienation, female sexuality, patriarchy and marginalization through close reading of key passages. The analysis focuses on Dai's use of characters, dialogue, and symbolism to understand the social fabric drawing on feminist theories of selfhood. The methodology emphasizes socio-cultural and literary analysis to highlight the novel's significance in addressing marginalized voices in literature from Northeast India.

Female Sexuality

"In Indian society there is such a resistance to any suggestions of sexuality, especially female sexuality, that writing about it has become an act of defying the establishment" (Nabar, 2011). The author is not reluctant to experiment with the themes of love, sex, variation in marriage and the *other* in the novel. The manner of treatment of subjects like sex and female sexuality is quite bold and open when she describes the acts of lovemaking "...and she heard him crying out with her, shouting, shouting and filling her, filling her with burning love" (Dai, p.101). The women make bold assertions of their ideas on love, sex and their bodies. Julie, daughter of an Air Marshall and a Russian mother was a beautiful model and choreographer who was involved in affair with two men simultaneously and was successful with both desperately in love with her. She believes that "Money can buy happiness" (Ibid., p.10) and that it could be a liberating factor. Her outlook about love was different:

'Love is a business. You have to work at it and find your options, and the business of love and loving is expensive, you know! Just to have a quite affair u need money. You need money for travel, transport, a nice room to meet in. Otherwise you will be too harassed to enjoy sex. If you have money you can buy time and have good love making that makes you feel good, too. You feel beautiful, in control and this equals happiness. So who says money can't buy happiness, hah? And even with a solid marriage you can still scout around, why not? It's a bit of extra spice here and there. After all we're not lumps of wood! We're flesh and blood and desire!' (Ibid., p.11).

Patriarchal designation of the female self

The story portrays rebel women in Adna, her aunt and cousin, who reject women's traditional roles and norms. The social status of a woman is framed by her role as mother, wife and daughter. In the novel the women characters defy patriarchal morality, deviate from it and follow their instincts and desires, situating themselves in the patriarchal notion of the 'Other'. For the female protagonists, their identity construction has much to do with rejecting patriarchal designation of the female self.

Adna's aunt had left the village long time back and left the country to start a new life with a man she

loved to the far off foreign land. Her affairs were not discussed in the village. She was in a way disowned by the society, norms of which she had defied. She had followed her heart as a self and an individual. She had rebelled patriarchy and she was discussed only in muffled tones. She was the 'other' in her own society. Even the news of her death was not spoken much about. Adna feels that her aunt may have bequeathed her bungalow to Adna because she "...was city bred, single and female, with perhaps an adventurous streak that she might have recognized as taking after her, because long ago she had left kith and kin behind to follow her desire and fall in love" (Ibid., p.3).

Adna makes arrangements to engage the inherited bungalow into a resort for people in love to meet and spend an "hour or two of happiness" (Ibid., p.3) and names it *Four Seasons*. She is rebellious, outgoing, single, independent and into an affair with a married man from Delhi who is an *Aying*ⁱ:

"I fell in love with him because at the time I first met him he was wild and rebellious" (Ibid., p.4).

Her cousin also had left the village because her father wouldn't accept her marrying an *aying*. Her father had disowned her saying that "no daughter of mine will be married to an *aying*.... Better to be slave than to marry an outsider" (Ibid., p.133).

Though women may eventually gain a certain degree of intellectual and economical independence, but in some aspects gender restriction and sexual subordination remain tenacious. Their status is thus derived from adherence to patriarchal norms. Jia, a reporter who wrote on issues of public interest, about women, religion and insurgency had no time for the man wooing her. She had fought the odds of life and was determined to fashion her life according to her choice after losing her baby at the age of 18, leaving her abusive husband. She "left the village saying that she could not live with a man she did not respect. She underlined the word 'respect' " (Ibid., p.29). She was consumed in pursuing her addiction to investigation.

Adna is differentiated from her friend Amine, a traditional woman "one who was always talking about monogamy" (Ibid., p.2). Amine was quite traditional in her outlook and happy being a mother and a homemaker. Adna relied much on Amine to deal with the workmen. It helped that Amine was a married woman and the workmen preferred to deal with her rather than with Adna who was single. In the case of Amine's mother-in-law, the fact that she had four sons gave her great status, and when she was widowed she wielded absolute control over her family. She gains this authority because she conformed to the patriarchal standard. Mareb's mother was a woman who flitted about the house obeying her husband's instruction silently and accepting all the subjugations along with it. She had sacrificed all her passions to be a perfect housewife.

Assertion of Self

Like all new literatures, 'Self' is another focal point of the novel which is preoccupied with the quest for identity. "An important phase in the growth of fiction in India, as elsewhere, is the gradual shift from the external world to the inner world of the individual. The focus of interest lies in the portrayal of the states of mind rather than in holding up the mirror of society" (Desai,p.1). The novel illustrates the permanent plight of individual identity in the modern changing world. Constant articulation of the silent pain gnaws away at the troubled inner self. Dai tries to picture the necessity of happiness that constitutes a very important aspect of human life.

Adna reveals her state of mind and her confused thoughts about her relationship with 'her friend' reflecting her insecurity in love. Being the other woman in her 'friend's' life she is entwined in the question of a woman's self and respect. At times she is scared of losing his love and at other times she

introspects on the impossibility of their relationship. She wants to hold on to the relationship where she finds happiness and love yet she cannot find an answer to the conformity of her relationship nor does she want her affair to be discovered by the world. She was the modern woman, with all the prospects of freedom to choose but at times this very freedom chokes her. In such situations she wants and finds solace in the embrace of total isolation. She compares of the custom of her native place and its difference with the place where she was trying to situate herself and questions, “In our parts men kept several wives. It was a practice sanctioned by custom. When I had asked a few women in such situations back home about that they had simply replied: ‘what is there to say? If the man is good, it’s ok’. Well there it was custom. Maybe it would change. But here, with me, it was- what?” (Ibid., p.32).

Dai confines her characters to the function of exploring similar feelings and experiences. Speaking about women writers, Jasbir Jain says, “As they negotiate the ground between power and powerlessness, they, in different ways, seek to establish a woman’s right to her body. Selfhood is not imagined as an abstract concept, but the struggle for space begins with the physical existence and the right to ownership. The body is controlled by the patriarchal morality, and by the roles of wifehood and motherhood” (Jain,p.119). Mareb treads a similar path of alienation (from family and society), variation in marriage, selfhood etc. Mareb always hesitates to go back to the hills from where she belonged. She has a dislike for her father who was a rich businessman. He had married a girl about her age after her mother had died. She thinks of him as a greedy man and even decides to sever her ties with him forever. Later she renews her love with Rohit after years of separation and after she was already married to Dayud, an engineer from her native place. Here, Mareb’s negligence of duties as a wife, a mother and variation from the marital norms is questioned.

Sense of alienation and marginalization

Through her characters the novelist also tries to explore a regional identity, at times reflecting the indifferent attitude of the mainstream which alienates and marginalizes northeast and its people and their want to be a part of the cognizance of the nation. In such instances the people belonging to the different states of the region feel a sense of bonding to one another and hold on for solidarity and strength. ‘There can also be otherness, relation, meaning between individuals who belong to different social groups- up to the point where the distance between these groups or universe of reference becomes so great that individual differences are swallowed up in it or can be symbolized with difficulty’ (Auge, p.28).

Though tribal societies are considered to be more egalitarian yet patriarchy operates here at different levels. While women from such ‘egalitarian’ cultures face the inbuilt obstruction to nib their rights and liberty, they have to negotiate the same problem at another level. This is where the question of being from northeast becomes relevant in the context of the ‘mainstream’ culture in a north Indian metro like Delhi. The mainstream does not seem to have much knowledge about Northeast. “From Delhi, the north east was like a map of mountains and rivers on another planet” (Ibid., p.8). The physical features and the skin are different. They are usually treated as the *other*. This fact of being differently treated is received with annoyance and sometimes vocally protested. In the novel Jia asserts her identity of being an Indian by thumping her fist violently with a loud thud on the roof of the car where the woman with whom she was arguing sat. The woman had shouted angrily: ‘hey you! Jao! JAO! Go back to your own DESH!’

Green, who is from Dimapur, always looks for a face that resembles that of her kind. She gets close with the author because of her affinity in looks and the region:

“Nothing like our own people eh?” (Ibid., p.78).

Traversing the coarseness of being the *other*

The readers cannot ignore the fact that Adna’s foreignness in Delhi is already encased in a double divide; the first suggesting her otherness of being a north eastern, and the second as being an ‘other’ to the place wherefrom she actually belongs. She has been out of her native land for a long time. She is comfortable living an anonymous life in a city. Adna’s is not the voice of a native from a region. She is multi-voiced. She is a part of both the societies. Her description of Jia after the latter’s first visit reflects her mainstream taste:

“She was short and square and dressed in d most improbable clothes- a bright sarong that flapped audibly and which appeared to b tangled against her sandals at the heels. In our hometown she would have been another typical, stolid, intractable tribal woman living in an unknown village” (Ibid., p.26).

Though the author paints a picture of nostalgia and longing for her ancestral place, she finds comfort in the anonymous life in the city:

“Delhi spread out below us I thought that among the millions of people in the world, in that one city among its millions there was someone who knew my name and who perhaps love me” (Ibid., p.136).

Conclusion

Stupid Cupid is a work which portrays these struggles of women against patriarchal morality. It also explores the conflict within the minds of the women in their attempt to assert their identity and realize their selfhood. The novel also investigates an inquisitive deliberation to the racial bias constituted in the minds of the regions, the northeast and the mainstream India.

Notes:

ⁱ Aying is a term used by the Adi tribe of Arunachal Pradesh to refer to the people who are not Adis or tribals. It is a term denoting the ‘Other’ of the Adis.

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