

## **The Intersection of Tradition and Modernity: Women's Struggles in Stupid Cupid**

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### **Abstract**

Mamang Dai is a prominent contemporary writer and a significant voice for the tribal communities of Arunachal Pradesh. She has crafted diverse and compelling portrayals of tribal women from the Northeast, giving voice to the unique challenges and issues they face. In her second novel, *Stupid Cupid*, she portrays a diverse range of women characters from the tribal communities of Arunachal Pradesh, each depicted with strikingly contrasting qualities. However, these tribal women characters are distinct and resilient, embodying a strong desire for freedom and independence. Through her narrative, Dai envisions the progress of these women, even as they endure brutality, segregation, exploitation, and oppression in various aspects of life. In this paper I have tried to enunciate those Women who stand for a progressive, independent, and empowered female figure challenging societal norms and gender roles. For instance, Adna the narrator of the story breaks the stereotype and opens a love nest "four seasons". In the same way Jia disobeys her father and joins a school in Delhi. So, with the help of these women characters this paper will help in understanding how the modern women do not fit into stereotypical moulds; instead, they reflect contemporary aspirations, contradictions, and complexities. I have also focused on the how these women represent a departure from traditional roles or expectations, showing a modern and individualized take on femininity, love, and autonomy.

**Keywords:** Woman, Tribal, Tradition, Love, Empowerment, Femininity, Autonomy

## Introduction

“From Delhi, the North-East was like a map of mountains and rivers on another planet.”

— Stupid Cupid

“History generally records the achievement of men; as men write it the actions of women are ignored” (Mahanta 1). Through the following statement Aparna Mahanta analyses the cause behind the exclusion of women’s presence in history. Since often history has been written by men from their perspective, they frequently overshadow the substantial contributions made by women, choosing instead to highlight and prioritize the roles played by men. This biasness arises from their inclination to view historical events and societal progress through a male-centric perspective, thereby strengthening established patriarchal systems. By interpreting history from this narrow viewpoint, they inadvertently dismiss or downplay the influence of women, thereby perpetuating a narrative that centres men as the primary drivers of progress and change. Thus, it can be said our so-called history is partial as it lacks the women’s opinion. “Women’s history is thus an endless cycle of struggles and retreats” (Mahanta 1). As Gerda Lerner argues, “Women have a history, women are in history” (Lerner 169), nevertheless there cannot be denying the fact that women existed either in the periphery (Ray 1) or in the footnotes (Eagleton 106). Thus, this representational gap can be bridged only through women’s participation and engagement. Women’s writing, in Northeast India began after the advent of British and with the coming of the American Baptist Missionary; “The first women’s writing in the Assamese language started with the writing of the American Baptist missionary” (Hazarika 106). Women in literature have long been

subjected to narrow representations, often cast in roles that either glorify their sacrifices or define them through their relationships with men. “The country and field have repeatedly failed in producing a conducive environment of accepting, nurturing and carving a space for women’s voices” (Biswas 3). However, contemporary literature has attempted to dismantle these outdated stereotypes, offering nuanced portrayals of women as independent individuals with their own desires and ambitions. Mamang Dai’s *Stupid Cupid* contributes significantly to this shift by presenting women who defy societal norms and create their own paths in life. “Mamang Dai’s *Stupid Cupid* opens up a completely new vista, where the women who have the full freedom to live their lives by their choice encounter numerous challenges in the metropolis, a miniature of Western society. This again brings home the fact that, outside patriarchal domination, women may face new types of threats and challenges” (Biswas 11). Mamang Dai’s novel *Stupid Cupid* presents a refreshing and unconventional portrayal of women, challenging traditional norms and redefining the concept of women empowerment. Set against the backdrop of Arunachal Pradesh and the urban landscape, the novel explores the struggles, aspirations, and resilience of its female characters. Dai’s women are not confined to stereotypical roles; instead, they navigate complex personal and societal challenges, asserting their independence in a world that often marginalizes them. The novel highlights the contrast between tribal and migrant women, shedding light on their experiences with discrimination, cultural displacement, and the harsh realities of urban life. Through these portrayals, *Stupid Cupid* not only captures the evolving identity of Northeast Indian women but also challenges mainstream narratives about gender roles and empowerment. In *Stupid Cupid*, Mamang Dai reinterprets the concept of the "Woman" by crafting female characters who are not merely defined by their relationships with men or their roles within a patriarchal society. Instead, these women possess aspirations, make independent choices, and navigate complex personal and societal challenges. Unlike traditional heroines who conform to

societal expectations, Dai's women are self-aware and capable of redefining their own destinies. The novel challenges the notion that a woman's fulfilment must come from domesticity and submission. Through the struggles and triumphs of her characters, Dai asserts that empowerment is about self-discovery, resilience, and the ability to make choices—even in the face of societal opposition.

### **Tribal and Migrant Women**

One of the novel's most striking aspects is its contrast between tribal and migrant women. Dai explores how these two groups experience different but interconnected struggles in their search for identity, belonging, and independence. Many of the women in *Stupid Cupid* belong to the indigenous tribes of Arunachal Pradesh. Dai presents them with complexity, highlighting the tension between tradition and modernity in their lives. These women are deeply rooted in their cultural heritage, yet they also seek opportunities beyond their traditional roles. Tribal societies often uphold rigid gender roles, where women are expected to fulfil familial and communal responsibilities. However, Dai's characters push against these limitations, striving for autonomy and self-expression. Their struggles reflect the broader reality of tribal women in Northeast India, who must navigate the intersection of tradition and modern aspirations. Mamang Dai's female characters range from those who are deeply immersed in tradition to those who face challenges in adjusting to modernity. The desire for education, employment, and personal freedom is a recurring theme in the novel. While some tribal women embrace change, others find it difficult to break free from societal expectations. This internal conflict illustrates the complexities of female identity in an evolving society. When we do a close reading of these women we find two opposite depictions of women: rural women and city women. City women are confident, graceful, and refined, while village women are portrayed as innocent, passive, simple, straightforward, and

hardworking like the others in their community. Driven by poverty and lack of opportunity, village women work very hard to make a living and to maintain their families. As in *The Legends of Pensam*, Dai describes a group of village women, “They have been in the forest all morning, cutting wood, cracking dry bamboo and piling stray branches seasoned by sun and rain to be carried back to the village. This is a daily necessity.” (2006: 73).

one important theme is how different spaces—whether physical, social, or cultural—are organized based on gender. Thus, the roles and expectations of men and women are often shaped by the spaces they occupy. For instance, certain areas in society may be considered more suitable or acceptable for men, while others are designated for women, reflecting the traditional gender roles in her stories. Dai also explores the tension between individualism and relationality. On the one hand some women are there who share a strong sense of interconnectedness and draw their sense of meaning and happiness from association with others. These women follow the gender roles set by society for them and stay within the spaces allowed for them. For example, in *Stupid Cupid*, Mareb’s mother gives up her own desires and preferences in her effort to be the ideal housewife. Mareb recalls how her mother looked after the house “obeying the instructions of her father”. (Dai 37) Adna the narrator of the novel describes how Mareb remembers her mother: “Mareb had never seen her mother reading nor heard her even once mention a book or an author’s name before. Perhaps she had hidden her heart All Mareb remembered of her was her putting up curtains, sewing lace on to the borders of tablecloths and providing some semblance of grace and good living in a life that was constantly on the move ...” (Dai 37). Thus, we can say that women in these communities remain confined by the internal structures of their societies. Although they venture outside the safety of their homes, they still face challenges and inequalities. Furthermore, these societies are not matriarchal, and women continue to be pushed to the

margins. Women's access to knowledge is restricted, and it is predominantly men who make decisions in both public and private matters in most tribal communities of the Northeast. Veeranki Maheswara Rao, in her study *Tribal Women of Arunachal Pradesh*, discovered that although women are regarded as important in society, they are not involved in the decision-making process in most communities of Arunachal Pradesh. She writes, "... decisions related to major issues are taken by husbands ... Men dominated in making decisions on number of children to bear, arranging children's marriage, taking/giving loans, sale/purchase of animals, settlement of disputes, social visits, and to some extent voting" (Rao 128).

However, Mamang Dai also portrays another type of tribal Northeast woman in her fiction: women who are more independent and resist following the societal structures imposed on them. They want to live in the city to break free from the control of powerful forces at different levels. Migration to the cities becomes an empowering experience for these women, as it offers them an escape from the patriarchal norms of village life, traditional family expectations, and troubled marriages and so on. Adna, the protagonist as well as the narrator of the novel follows a similar path. She leaves her hometown, Itanagar, and moves to New Delhi, a city over 2000 km away from the Northeast, after completing a hotel management course in Guwahati and Calcutta. Adna has liberal views and enjoys the free lifestyle in Delhi. She inherits a property from her late aunt and decides to transform it into a love nest called "Four Seasons." She aims to create a welcoming space where both men and women, lovers and friends, can gather freely without any restrictions. This idea comes into her mind after feeling embarrassed multiple times while trying to book a room, as if she were doing something wrong. Adna is open-minded, progressive and not restricted to traditional views or beliefs: "The idea came to me when I was looking for such a place myself, and discovered that the constraints of time and money were nothing compared to the

embarrassment of trying to book a room. Sundry managers and receptionists eyed up and down as if you were committing a criminal act” (Dai 1). While the older people in her village warned the younger ones like Adna about the harshness of Delhi and encouraged them to marry and stay close to home, Adna chooses to follow her passion, “From our hometowns news would reach us about family get-togethers and picnics, and the elders asked us when we would return. We knew this was their way of saying. They hoped we would marry and settle down with good, local men, because how would anyone meet the right person away from home.... They followed the news about shocking murders and the cruelty of Delhi, which was reported daily. ‘No one will help you there, because no one will know who you are’, they said. (Dai 14). She not only follows her passion but is also very much satisfied with her choice as She says she likes everything about the city, “... this anonymity was the very thing I liked. After the watchful expectations of a small town, being a total stranger among strangers was a relief and a pleasure... I like the heavy evenings, filled with diesel fumes and smoke, and the heat burning our faces ... dusty trees in full bloom...Coming out of restaurants we would stand under the trees and puff at our cigarettes. It was all very different from where I came.” (Dai 14)

In many Northeast communities, people are expected to marry within their specific ethnic, social, or class group, while those who marry outside are often disowned or looked down upon. Adna recalls her aunt, who married outside their community and was never spoken of again, as she was seen as a disgrace to the family. Like her aunt, Adna also believes in marrying for love, regardless of community or background. Adna falls in love with a married man. She fell in love with him because in their first meeting he was wild and rebellious. She with her current boyfriend lives in a dreamy world of love, romance, tenderness, liberty and ecstasy. Throughout the novel his name is not revealed Adna addresses

him as Friend. She constantly fears that their relationship might come to an end. When Adna meets Mareb's boyfriend Rohit, in a jazz bar, she is gripped by the fear that he might know her lover's wife. She could not imagine her life without him but being a migrant, she can never own a citizenship in this new place. Adna's relationship with her Delhi boyfriend reflects the rigid stereotypes often associated with Northeast women. Northeastern women, especially those from tribal communities, are often stereotyped as being overly flexible and immoral. While most tribal women from the Northeast carry a strong sense of freedom and independence from their homeland, they are often misunderstood by others, no matter how genuine they are. When Adna's boyfriend leaves for Canada without giving her a proper explanation, she consoles herself by saying he wanted to be with his wife. But Green her friend helps her to see the reality by pointing out the truth, "Maybe he's not travelling with his wife. He might be travelling with a new girl'. I said this as a challenge. 'The man who crosses the line once can do it twice, thrice. What's to stop a guy?'" (Dai 117). A recurring theme in *Stupid Cupid* is the aspiration of village women to move to the city in search of a better life. Jia, Adna's cousin, wants to join a course in Delhi, but she is not allowed to study and to go out of the state of Arunachal Pradesh by her father. Jia has modern views; she disobeys her father and joins a school in Delhi. Adna is happy with the decision of Jia and she says, "Jia's father had been against sending his children to study in distant schools out of the state" (Dai 71). Rita who studies in Delhi also belongs to tribal community but knows nothing about Adna, Mareb and Jia. They too don't know anything about Rita, though they all are tribes. She befriends Yoyo. Only now the young tribes become friends after going to schools and colleges out of their state. Dai highlights the positive changes in the lives of Northeast people in Delhi. She writes: "Rita was from a different tribe from another district and neither Jia nor I knew anything about her. It is a big state, I told my friend, and for most of our history the different tribes had never even interacted with each other properly, even if



they lived in the next valley. It was only now that young people like Yoyo and Rita were meeting in schools and colleges” (Dai 88).

### **Migration and the Struggles of Northeastern Women**

There are several reasons of migration in India. These reasons can be historical, political or personal. In the words of Rushdie says, “The distinguishing feature of our time is mass migration, mass displacement, globalized finances and industries (425)”. Dai has portrayed this thing in *Stupid Cupid*. “Most are members of indigenous Arunachal Pradesh tribes who want to live a peaceful life, migrate from the hills to the city, and break away from the hegemonic force that dominates their society” (Rahaman 108).

The feeling of homelessness experienced by every immigrant is undoubtedly real and profound. Northeast migrants are seen as culturally different from the Indian mainstream and are classified down as ‘others’. While many other communities in India also face discrimination on the basis of religion, caste, and ethnicity, their nationality and origin are rarely questioned, no matter how the circumstances are. While other communities can easily blend into the heartland, Northeast migrants are unable to do so. The migrant women from tribal backgrounds endure numerous forms of oppression and marginalization at the hands of city dwellers. In *Stupid Cupid*, Mamang Dai portrays the everyday experiences of racial discrimination that people from the Northeast face in Delhi. When Adna’s cousin Jia and her friend TD try to hire a cab, a rude woman jumps into the back seat and refuses to leave. Not only this the woman also questions their nationality and citizenship and makes a racist remark, “Hey you!Jao!Jao! Go back to your own ... Desh!” (Dai, 52). This makes Jia more furious, she jumps out of the cab, shouts at the woman in the street, and angrily scolds her, saying: “How dare you say such a thing? Do you think I’m Chinese, huh? I am Indian. Do you know where I come from? Do you know where that is, you idiot woman? And I bet you are not even from Delhi. You must be from some lousy backwaters! Jao!Jao! Hah! And even

if I was Chinese, you have no right to say such a thing to anyone! Its people like you who create hatred, you know that? You scum! And then she spat into the cab!” (Dai 53)

*Stupid Cupid* provides us a deep insight into the experiences and aspirations of Northeastern women, focusing particularly on their struggles with displacement. “Dai, in *Stupid Cupid* highlights the huge gap that exists between a migrant woman’s aspirations and expectations from the city and the inherent reality” (Mahanta 248). In the words of Barry, “The distinction between male and female is everywhere a basic building block of social organisation, and most societies have far more elaborate and differentiated expectations of behaviour appropriate to the sexes than do contemporary western societies... every society recognises relations of marriage and kinship, and attaches normative expectations to the roles of husbands and wives, parents and children and often many additional relationships within extended families... The fact of difference is universal and so is its recognition” (19). When Adna and Mareb first arrived in Delhi, both of them were hopeful about the city and easily got used with the surrounding of the new world. However, Dai emphasizes the significant gap between the desires and expectations migrant women have for the city and the reality they face. The women from the village long for a better life in the city, believing it to be a place of opportunities and progress. However, when they finally make the move, they are confronted with the stark reality of urban life—harsh living conditions, struggles for survival, and an overwhelming sense of alienation. The challenges they face, such as financial instability, societal pressures, and the loss of their cultural identity, leave them disillusioned. Instead of the freedom and success they had imagined, they experience regret, realizing that the city is not as welcoming or fulfilling as they had hoped. As we can find in the words of Adna when she says: “Those were happy days. Everything was new and young, and every moment felt like a new beginning. In the mid-eighties if anyone had asked us who we were and what we were doing in Delhi, my friends would have shouted back: We are here because we want to

be here. We like it here and that's it" (Dai 13). The struggle of these women in an unfamiliar place is very much evident because they always find themselves in the situation that are difficult and intolerable to them. When they move to urban areas or regions outside their homeland, they often face cultural displacement, discrimination, and a sense of alienation. They find it difficult to adapt to new lifestyles, customs, and societal expectations that are vastly different from their traditional ways of life. The lack of acceptance and opportunities further adds to their hardships, making survival in these foreign environments an ongoing battle. As a result, they frequently find themselves in situations that feel overwhelming and intolerable, leading to emotional distress and a longing for their native land. This is very much evident in the words of Adna when she says "Sometimes the barking of dogs at night was louder than the roar of traffic, as if they were trying to complete with the sounds of the city to remind me of home. And then I knew that my heart would always be locked in those dim, rain-wit hills" (Dai 15). Safety is a major concern for the women who migrate to Delhi. On a night at about 10:00 p.m. a Nepali man comes to Adna's apartment and tells her that some people are running around. Initially, Adna doesn't believe him, but when he points out *Four Seasons*, she goes with him to Amine's house, where they discover Amine's lifeless body. Two workers who had been employed at their hotel murder Amine for money. This shattering event crushes all of Adna's hopes and desires, and she decides she wants to return to her hills and spend the rest of her life there in the village.

## **Conclusion**

This paper analyses how Dai's female characters in *Stupid cupid* navigate through societal pressures, redefine their identities, and assert their agency in both tribal and urban settings. The study also examines the challenges they face, including discrimination, cultural alienation, and gender bias, while highlighting the novel's contribution to feminist discourse

in Northeast Indian literature. Mamang Dai's *Stupid Cupid* very boldly present female characters who are strong, independent, and willing to challenge societal norms. Through the contrast between tribal and migrant women, the novel highlights the complexities of female identity in contemporary society. It also sheds light on the discrimination, gender biases, and struggles that women face when navigating both traditional and modern spaces. By portraying women who refuse to be confined by societal expectations, Dai presents a powerful narrative of empowerment and resilience. *Stupid Cupid* ultimately challenges conventional notions of femininity and reinforces the idea that the modern woman is not just a symbol of change but a force that actively reshapes her own destiny. The novel's significance extends beyond literature, serving as a commentary on the broader socio-political landscape of Northeast India. It calls for a reassessment of gender roles, advocating for a society where women are free to define their own paths. Through its compelling storytelling and complex characters, *Stupid Cupid* stands as an important contribution to feminist discourse, urging readers to recognize and celebrate the strength of women in all their diversity

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