

Indigenous Voices and Oral Traditions in Mamang Dai's "An Obscure Place"

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Abstract

This paper explores Mamang Dai's poem "An Obscure Place" from the perspectives of Indigenous identity/tradition and ecology. It is about the indigenous people of the tribes of North-East India, the Adis and the land. Moreover, as this poem also shows, mountains and rivers may not vanish from view. These natural landmarks are not merely physical features, but living archives and historically significant entities that serve as vital sites of commemoration within the tribal psyche. By integrating historical narratives from the *Aabang* folk tradition, the poem actively safeguards an oral cultural legacy that bridges the historical divide between ancestors and the present day without requiring written literacy. These intergenerational oral histories serve as vital, ongoing sites for identity construction, deeply influenced by the *Donyi-Polo* belief system, which posits that the natural world is a sacred, interconnected whole. Furthermore, the work employs evocative metaphors and symbolic imagery to transform abstract themes—such as communal silence, cultural loss, and external interference—into a tangible reality. These symbols provide a direct reference to the radical transformations that occurred during the foundational stages of indigenous societies. Ultimately, "An Obscure Place" transcends simple description to act as a literary insurrection, standing in defiant resistance against the encroaching pressures of modernisation and systematic marginalisation.

Keywords: Adi Community, Orality, *Aabang*, *Donyi-Polo*, Ecocriticism, Indigenous Resistance

Introduction

In recent years, issues of environment, identity, marginalisation, and exclusion have become central concerns in literary studies, particularly within postcolonial and ecocritical frameworks. Ecocriticism is primarily concerned with how literature engages with the natural world, generates meaning, and shapes human understanding of the environment (Glotfelty xix). According to Greg Garrard, ecocriticism investigates how literary texts depict the interdependence between humans and their surroundings as a significant cultural and moral issue (1). Lawrence Buell expands on this by asserting that literature is an active medium that shapes our environmental consciousness and ethical values, moving beyond mere imitation of the natural world (vii). By applying these lenses, it becomes clear that literature acts as a dynamic force capable of reshaping our fundamental understanding of the environment. In

this context, Mamang Dai's poetry emerges as a powerful expression of indigenous identity, memory, and ecological awareness.

Rooted in the cultural traditions of Arunachal Pradesh, Dai's poetry is deeply influenced by tribal culture, oral narratives, and a close relationship with nature. In her poem "An Obscure Place", nature is not presented as a passive backdrop but as an active, living presence. Mountains, rivers, and forests are closely connected to memory, culture, and identity. From a postcolonial ecocritical perspective, environmental representation is closely linked to histories of power, colonisation, and cultural identity (Huggan and Tiffin 1-2). As Vohra (2013) argues, these natural elements are not merely physical but embody myth, history, and collective significance (46). Oral tradition is another key aspect of Dai's poetry. Gahatraj further explains that shared narratives help construct and sustain cultural identity across generations (416). In this way, storytelling functions as a living record of the community's past and present.

Dai's poetry also reflects the *Donyi-Polo* belief system, which emphasises the sacredness and interconnectedness of nature. This perspective aligns with deep ecology, which argues that all forms of life have intrinsic value and that humans are not superior to nature (Singha 2). At the same time, theorists such as Timothy Morton suggest that the concept of "nature" itself should be critically examined rather than accepted (Morton 1). This adds depth to Dai's work, which not only celebrates nature but also presents a more balanced and thoughtful relationship between humans and the environment.

Thus, this paper examines "An Obscure Place" as an expression of indigenous voice, oral tradition, and ecological consciousness. It argues that the poem is not only about nature or memory but also about resistance. Through its use of landscape, storytelling, and belief systems, the poem preserves identity in the face of modernisation and marginalisation. In this way, the "obscure place" becomes a powerful space of memory, identity, and cultural resistance.

Literature Review

Scholars have approached Mamang Dai's poetry from various perspectives, particularly focusing on her treatment of nature, culture, and indigenous identity. A central concern in these discussions is the representation of landscape and ecological consciousness in her work. Harpreet Vohra, for instance, argues that mountains in Dai's poetry are not merely geographical elements but are closely associated with tribal identity and spirituality (45-46). In this sense, nature in her poetry is not simply a background but a living and meaningful presence. Similarly, Khumanthem Gunibala Devi and Sangeeta Laishram (1484) examine Northeast Indian poetry as a space where ecology and culture intersect, highlighting the close relationship between human existence, myth, and the natural world.

From an ecocritical perspective, literature reflects the interaction between cultural identity and environmental awareness. Jain observes that eco-poetry presents nature as a dynamic and shaping force rather than a passive element (42). This aligns with Dai's poetry, where nature is deeply intertwined with memory and identity. In addition to ecological concerns, scholars have also emphasised the importance of oral tradition in her work. Yumirin Kapai notes that storytelling in "An Obscure Place" functions as a key means of preserving history in communities with limited written records (4). Similarly, Gahatraj argues that shared narratives contribute to the formation of collective memory and identity (416).

Sukla Singha further connects Dai's poetry to the indigenous philosophy of *Donyi-Polo* and the principles of deep ecology, suggesting that both emphasise the intrinsic value of all living beings (1–2). This perspective challenges anthropocentrism and promotes a balanced relationship between humans and nature. Furthermore, Dihingia highlights that Northeast Indian literature often engages with themes of marginalisation, violence, and identity, linking these concerns to broader socio-political contexts in the region (67–68).

While these studies provide valuable insights into ecology, orality, and symbolism in Dai's poetry, they tend to examine these elements separately. What remains underexplored is how these aspects function together as a unified form of cultural resistance. This paper addresses this gap by analysing landscape, storytelling, and belief systems in "An Obscure Place" as interconnected elements that collectively express indigenous identity and resistance.

Analysis of the text and Discussion

Mamang Dai's "An Obscure Place" (2004) presents indigenous identity as fundamentally collective rather than individual. The repeated use of the pronoun "we" constructs a communal voice, suggesting that the speaker embodies the experiences of an entire community. This collective articulation of identity highlights how memory, history, and cultural belonging are shared rather than privately owned. At the same time, this unified voice functions as a subtle form of resistance, asserting indigenous presence against forces that seek to silence or marginalise it.

The line, "the history of our race begins with the place of stories" (Dai 1), foregrounds storytelling as the foundational pillar of cultural identity. This "place of stories" is directly informed by the *Aabang* folk tradition, which integrates historical narratives to safeguard an oral cultural legacy. By drawing on these intergenerational oral histories, the poem bridges the historical divide between ancestors and the present without requiring written literacy. This reliance on the *Aabang* tradition allows the community to bypass the exclusion of indigenous voices from dominant, written historical narratives, addressing the speaker's uncertainty about whether their language "belongs to a written past" (Dai 5–6). Ultimately, these narrative practices transform the poem into a living record, asserting that indigenous knowledge is a dynamic and evolving system that preserves a continuous, lived history through collective memory.

Landscape emerges as another central component of identity in the poem. The lines, "There are mountains. Oh! There are mountains. We climbed every slope. We slept by the river" (Dai 8–10), depict an intimate and embodied relationship between people and their environment. The repetition of "mountains" emphasises their permanence, while the actions of climbing and resting suggest familiarity and belonging. Nature is thus not a passive backdrop but an active presence that shapes memory and identity, transforming the landscape into a living cultural archive.

The poem also engages with themes of marginalisation and enforced silence. The lines, "Yesterday the women hid their faces, they forbade their children to speak" (Dai 20–21), evoke an atmosphere of fear and control, indicating how expression is restricted. This silencing reflects broader processes of cultural suppression; however, silence can also be read as a form of resistance, where what remains unspoken carries its own significance.

The imagery of violence further intensifies the sense of cultural disruption. In the lines, “See! They have slain the wild cat and buried the hornbill in her maternal sleep” (Dai 24–25), the killing of these animals symbolises more than physical destruction. The hornbill, a culturally significant symbol, represents continuity, tradition, and identity. Its death, therefore, signifies a rupture in cultural transmission, pointing to the erosion of indigenous heritage under external pressures.

The connection between land, memory, and ancestry is powerfully expressed in the line, “the waving grassland where the bones of our fathers are buried” (Dai 30–31). The presence of ancestors within the landscape collapses the boundary between past and present, turning the land into a repository of history and identity. In this sense, identity is inseparable from place, as both memory and ancestry are embedded within the natural environment.

Finally, the poem reflects an indigenous worldview in which nature is sacred, interconnected, and alive. Human existence, landscape, and spirituality are deeply intertwined, suggesting a holistic and balanced relationship with the environment. This perspective challenges anthropocentric views and affirms the intrinsic value of all living beings.

The poem also reveals a deep sense of displacement shaped by external forces and unfamiliar influences. The intrusion of “strangers” suggests not only physical presence but also cultural and linguistic imposition that disrupts indigenous ways of life. This displacement creates a sense of alienation, where identity becomes uncertain and fragmented. However, rather than portraying this condition as a complete loss, the poem suggests that memory continues to survive through its connection with the land. The landscape, therefore, becomes a silent witness that absorbs and retains experiences that cannot be openly expressed.

In addition, the poem presents nature as an active participant in emotional and cultural experience. Images such as mist, grassland, and mountains are closely tied to feelings of grief, remembrance, and belonging. These natural elements reflect the community's internal state, creating a parallel between emotional life and ecological space. This reinforces the idea that human experience cannot be separated from the environment, as both exist in a relationship of mutual influence and continuity.

The poem also reflects a subtle tension between visibility and invisibility. The idea of an “obscure place” suggests a space that remains outside dominant historical and cultural narratives. This obscurity, however, does not imply absence; rather, it points to a form of existence that is overlooked or ignored. By bringing attention to such a space, the poem challenges dominant perspectives and reasserts the importance of indigenous presence and experience. In this way, obscurity becomes a form of quiet resistance, preserving identity beyond the reach of external control.

Taken together, these elements—collective voice, storytelling, landscape, silence, and symbolic violence—demonstrate that “An Obscure Place” is not merely a reflection of indigenous identity but an active articulation of cultural resistance. Through its layered imagery and communal voice, the poem preserves memory while asserting the continuity of indigenous culture amid marginalisation and change.

Findings

The analysis demonstrates that oral storytelling plays a central role in preserving cultural memory. Rather than relying on written records, knowledge and tradition are transmitted across generations through narrative practices, ensuring continuity of identity. The study further reveals that landscape functions as a living archive of identity. Mountains, rivers, and ancestral land are not merely physical elements but carry memory and cultural meaning, connecting the present generation to its past.

The poem also highlights the themes of marginalisation and cultural disruption, where images of silence, fear, and violence reflect external pressures on indigenous communities. At the same time, these elements suggest subtle forms of resistance, giving space to voices and histories that are often suppressed.

The findings further show that displacement in the poem is not only geographical but also cultural and psychological. The presence of unfamiliar forces creates a sense of disconnection from language, tradition, and identity. Despite this, the poem suggests that cultural continuity is sustained through memory embedded in the landscape. This indicates that identity is not entirely lost but transformed, adapting to new realities while retaining its core connection to the past.

It is also evident that the poem constructs a strong emotional relationship between people and their environment. Natural elements function as carriers of both personal and collective experience, reflecting grief, endurance, and belonging. This highlights the role of the environment not only as a physical space but as an emotional and cultural framework through which identity is understood and preserved.

The findings also indicate that the poem's concept of obscurity carries both negative and positive meanings. While it reflects marginalisation and exclusion, it also allows indigenous identity to survive without complete assimilation. This dual nature suggests that obscurity can serve both as a condition of suppression and as a strategy of preservation, enabling culture to endure in subtle yet meaningful ways. In addition, the poem expresses an ecological worldview in which nature is understood as sacred and interconnected, reinforcing a balanced relationship between human life and the environment.

Conclusion

In "An Obscure Place," Mamang Dai achieves a profound synthesis by weaving together landscape, oral heritage, and the *Donyi-Polo* worldview into a unified expression of indigenous endurance. The geography of mountains and rivers is transformed from a passive backdrop into a living archive of cultural memory, where ancestral remains and communal stories preserve a continuous, lived history. This oral record, operating within the tension between the written word and ancient silence, serves as the primary vessel for an identity deeply rooted in the land. By asserting that history begins with a "place of stories," the poem challenges the authority of dominant written discourse and validates indigenous ways of knowing as dynamic, evolving knowledge systems. While external influences and "strangers" create uncertainty and displacement, the poem demonstrates that memory rooted in the landscape provides an unwavering sense of belonging. Furthermore, the concept of "obscurity" functions as a strategic form of quiet resistance, preserving cultural integrity in a space that survives beyond the reach of external control and systematic marginalisation. Although the text acknowledges the "symbolic violence" of cultural erasure—symbolised by the slaying of the hornbill—it refuses to succumb to a narrative of total loss. Instead, it draws

on ecological interconnectedness to affirm that the indigenous spirit remains inseparable from its sacred environment. Ultimately, the poem stands as a defiant literary insurrection, proving that when landscape and memory converge, they create a transformative space where indigenous culture can endure and persist against the encroaching pressures of modernisation.

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