

“I am the chance syllable that orders the world”: A Postcolonial Study of Mamang Dai’s Works

Debosmita Routh

M.A.English (Pursuing)
Presidency University, Kolkata

Abstract

Poetry from North-East India may be read as a constant struggle over articulation and function of language in the expression of race, region, and place in postcolonial India. Edward Said claims that every nation has its own internal ‘Other,’ which stands doubly marginalized by global imperialism that colonizes a nation and the internal colonization faced by them against the mainstream social traditions. While India was itself a colony of the British Raj, North East India stood doubly neglected both globally as well as on a national level.

This paper takes as its primary source the works of Mamang Dai, a poet and author from Arunachal Pradesh, India. Using the colonizer’s language, English, she constructs a body of work, or ‘Minor Literature,’ that has been “deterritorialized” through defamiliarizing devices. Dai’s works ought to be read from an ecocritical perspective, recording the interconnectedness and interdependence of the land, its people, and the diverse natural environment.

This paper aims to portray how Mamang Dai uses nature as the point of reference in establishing the socio-political history of the Adi community, thereby rejecting the statist notion of history. In doing so, it explores the philosophy of ‘Donyi-Polo’ as followed by the Adi community and shows how such ecologically harmonious relationship between humans and nature can act as a safeguard against the onslaughts of capitalist commercialism, and become the alternate epistemological framework for the articulation of history. Ultimately, this paper aims to contribute to the broader discourse on postcolonial and environmental humanities.

Keywords: deep ecology, donyi polo, historicism, Mamang Dai, postcolonialism

Arunachal Pradesh and Mamang Dai

Before being proclaimed a state in 1987, Arunachal Pradesh was known as the North East Frontier Agency (NEFA) and was directly managed by the Indian government's Ministry of External Affairs. Its international borders are shared by Myanmar in the east, Bhutan in the west, and the McMahon Line, a disputed 1129-kilometer border with China's Tibet Autonomous Region in the north. As part of the Tibet Autonomous Region, China claims the entire state as South Tibet. The majority of Arunachal Pradesh was taken by China during the Sino-Indian War in 1962. Chinese people, referred to as "border guardians," are still living in recently built villages inside and outside of the disputed area in Arunachal Pradesh. While foreign influence and forces take centre stage in the formation of policies in their state, the indigenous original inhabitants of the geographical area are marginalised and restricted to the

peripheries. Only after independence did the tribal populations of northeastern India enter the national political sphere.

It has always been a territory that has faced marginalization and violence both by foreign powers and by national powers. As of 2024, Indian Armed Forces continue to exercise special powers (under Armed Forces Special Powers Act or AFSPA) in Arunachal Pradesh. The imbalance in power dynamics leads to the politics of racism, marked by a process of colonization and alienation of a group or community within their own nation.

A celebrated writer, journalist, and former civil servant belonging to the Adi community from Arunachal Pradesh, Mamang Dai was born in Pasighat in the East Siang district of Arunachal Pradesh. Her poems center around life in the mountains of Arunachal Pradesh, the belief systems of the tribals, and the deep, inseparable bond between the tribals and nature. She received Padma Shri in 2011 from the Government of India. The government of Arunachal Pradesh bestowed upon her the annual Verrier Erwin Prize in 2013 for her book *Arunachal Pradesh: The Hidden Land* (2002). She was honoured with the Sahitya Akademi Award in 2017 for her novel, *The Black Hill* (2014), written in English.

North-East as the 'Other'

Edward Said's 1978 book, *Orientalism*, puts forward the theory of 'othering' in which the West views the East as the 'other' creating binary oppositions of 'we' versus 'them' and 'us' versus 'them.' He claims that the imperial project was limited to the political realm but was expanded to include the aesthetic, scholarly, economic, social, and cultural domains: "Western imperialists plot to hold down the Oriental world. It is rather a distribution of geopolitical awareness into aesthetic, scholarly, economic, sociological, historical, and philological texts; it is an elaboration not only of a basic geographical distinction (the world is made up of two unequal halves, Orient and Occident) but also of a whole series of 'interests' which, by such means as scholarly discovery, philological reconstruction, psychological analysis, landscape and sociological description, it not only creates but also maintains" (Said 12). Said goes on to claim that every nation has its own internal 'other' that faces internal colonization and marginalization against mainstream social and cultural practices, in addition to the global imperialism that is faced by the nation at large. While India faced the brunt of colonization by the British Raj, the states of the North-East were doubly marginalized both globally and within India. Literature from the North East can thus be seen as an attempt at articulating their race, religion, and socio-cultural customs in postcolonial India, raging and protesting against the constant attempts of the homogenizing tendencies of mainland India towards the North-East states that are distant both geographically and as a result of 'othering.'

Postcolonialism, The Language Dilemma, and Minor Literature

Postcolonialism is a critical theoretical framework that examines the cultural, social, economic, and political impacts of colonialism and imperialism on societies and individuals. It includes criticizing colonialism and imperialism, decentering western perspectives, highlighting the hybrid nature of the complex cultures that have emerged as a result of colonial ventures, and examines the power dynamics between the colonizers and the colonized along with modes of resistance against such colonial oppression. Postcolonial literature is the body literature that arises from countries that were former colonies of

European powers, that often addresses the problems and consequences of colonization, especially questions relating to political and cultural independence, identity, and marginalization. Mamang Dai's works falls under the broad category of postcolonial literature. Writing as a tribal member, she challenges the West's claims of the 'other' being incapable of articulating their experiences. Her works focus on the life and experiences of her people in Arunachal Pradesh and her writings reflect the lyrical and poetic quality of the Adi tongue.

In Arunachal Pradesh, where different tribal groups speak different languages that are not intelligible to each other, nation-building process has relegated language politics to the background. The people of this region have decided to reject language as a cultural marker and instead agreed to remember their past and history in an alien, acquired language – English, the language of the colonizer. Dai's decision to write in the language of the colonizer, English, can be seen as an attempt at reclaiming the language and making it her own, as Kamala Das articulates in her poem, "An Introduction":

"... The language I speak,
Becomes mine, its distortions, its
queernesses
All mine, mine alone." (Das 11–13).

Recording the legends and lores of the Adi community in English, Mamang Dai blends the lyrical and melodic quality of the Adi tongue into English, creating new pathways in Indian English literature. The passage that follows, which describes the rhapsodist's melodies and the rhythmical motions of the "ponung" dancers, places Dai in the context of an Adi rhapsodist who writes in a foreign language while incorporating the melodious harmonies of the mountainous region to which she belongs:

"They have not slept for many nights. If they close their eyes for a minute, if their souls stray, if they miss a step, then the journey will be over before its time and they will return to the present overwhelmed with a sorrow that will haunt them to an early death. The man who leads them is dressed in a woman's ga-le and wears the dumling, an intricate hair ornament that swings with the rhythm of his chanting. He is the miri, the shaman and the rhapsodist.

"Tonight the dancers have arrived at the crucial point in the narration of their history where they will 'travel the road'" (Dai, *The Legends of Pensam* 50).

In an email interview with Dr. Nilanshu Kumar Agarwal (NKA), titled "Fusion of Journalism and Poetry," Mamang Dai (MD) remarks about the language of poetic expression and her decision to write in English:

"NKA: In some of the poems, you have given notes. These notes explicate certain North-Eastern cultural aspects. The poems like "Tapu," "Let no Tear," "Song of the Dancers," "Man and Brother" and "The Missing Link" use these explanatory notes. What is the necessity of these notes in your poetry? Are these notes not because you are writing about your own culture in an alien language? Will it not be better to write about our indigenous culture in our own native languages? The expression of indigenous culture in an alien language will definitely raise these problems. Moreover, this dragon like alien language may eliminate the regional languages one day. We must do something to preserve our languages. To be short, what should be the language of poetic expression – our native regional language or an alien one? Your views, please.

MD: If I write in Adi I will still have to use Roman script since we are a non-script language. Currently there is a move to devise a new script for the tani group of tribes

of Arunachal i.e. the tribes practicing Donyi-Polo and who claim common ancestry from a legendary forefather called Tani, but we have 26 tribes in Arunachal and more than a 100 sub-clans so the consensus is more for English and Hindi as the lingua franca and for writing. At the moment we have also launched an Arunachal Pradesh Literary Society to promote writing in local languages/dialects which may be translated into English or Hindi or other major Indian languages. About the language of poetic expression – people say – well, Spanish and French for love, Urdu for ghazal, something else for Haiku, but I think poetry in any language will have meaning depending on the honesty of feeling.” (“Fusion of Journalism and Poetry: An email interview with Mamang Dai by Dr. Nilanshu Kumar Agarwal”).

In their 1975 book, *Kafka: Toward a Minor Literature*, Felix Guattari and Gilles Deleuze defined ‘minor literature’ as a literary production created by a minority using the language of the majority. Three features—the deterritorialisation of language, the individual's link to a geopolitical urgency, and an integrated assemblage of enunciation—are used to characterise small literature. Deterritorialization is described by Deleuze as “the impossibility of not writing.” The minor literature being written within a major language is deterritorializing not only of language within a minority group but is also a way for a minority population to relate to a world that they are both a part of and that is alien to them. Minor literature thus becomes a means of mediating and situating the minority group within a major language and a major community. Mamang Dai's works about her culture as a member of the Adi community and about the life that the tribals in Arunachal Pradesh live, written in English, can thus be classified under ‘Minor Literature.’ The author is writing from within a minority group that faces oppression, racism, segregation and discrimination, and still operates within the larger society. She uses off-British syntax to defamiliarize the language through her use of deterritorializing devices. The impossibility of not writing from this standpoint is very strong as the narratives about a way of life that is only known to members of the particular tribal community can only be written by a member of that community, and yet requires it to be told in a language that is comprehensible to the larger, major oppressive society.

Donyi-Polo Worldview and Deep Ecology Movement

Poetry from North-East India portrays land through the images of rivers, trees, hills, mountains, and weaves it carefully with their tradition, culture, myths, and legends. Modern narratives from the north-east blend the elements of traditional poetry with contemporary issues of politics, insurgency, violence, and identity. Nature is an overwhelming presence in poetry from the north-east as it serves as the marker from their traditions, culture, and identity, and also serves to reflect the concerns of the tribals about environmental issues like deforestation, mining, ethnic violence, insurgency, counter-insurgency, military violence, loss of homeland, all of which ultimately lead to ecological degradation.

Mamang Dai talks about life in Arunachal Pradesh, its beauty, tradition, and culture interlaced with myths, legends and the rich heritage of the land. Her works use a plethora of imagery drawn from nature. Bestowing nature with a life and presence of its own, Dai reflects the philosophy of Donyi-Polo that is prevalent in the Adi community of Arunachal Pradesh. They believe that all things on earth – “[the] mountains and hills, the evergreen forest, the rushing rivers and rivulets, the animals and birds, the moving cloud and rain-fall, the shining objects in the sky” (Ering) – as sacred entities. The Donyi Polo Yekam Kebang (DYK), led by the late Talom Rukbo, launched the “Donyi-Polo Movement” in 1968 as an

uprising against the government of India's statist violence and the growing number of Christian missionaries' involvement in Adi-inhabited areas. Tribals' native religions were being marginalised by the arrival of Christianity in the northeastern regions, and the only option to keep them alive was to institutionalise them. "Donyi-Polo" refers to the God or Goddess; "Donyi" literally means the sun, while "Polo" signifies the moon. All things and entities are thought to have originated from these two fundamental bodies. All elements of nature are regarded as sacred and living because it is responsible for preserving an ecologically harmonious relationship between all living and non-living entities on Earth, which has been attributed to it as the watcher, witness, guide, and protector of the Adis. Mamang Dai discusses the significance of Donyi-Polo to the Adi community:

"The traditional belief of the Adi community to which I belong is full of this union [between man and nature]. Everything has life - rocks, stones, trees, rivers, hills, and all life is sacred. This is called Donyi-Polo, literally meaning Donyi- Sun, and Polo-moon as the physical manifestation of a supreme deity, or what I like to interpret as 'world spirit'" ("The Land as 'Living Presence'").

She further states, "I live in a small town surrounded by hills. If I travel to other parts of the state it is the same - more mountains and forests, river crossings and rough roads. So the physical presence of the land is very tangible" ("The Land as 'Living Presence'"). In her poem "Banjo Moon," Dai observes how each small aspect of nature contributes to the natural rhythm of life on Earth:

"The tin roof is a music maker
drumming hard notes of water.
All night a pond
dreams of water lilies
to decorate its heart" (Dai, "Banjo Moon" 59).

The Adis claim to have been born from Abo Tani, the first man on earth who born out of soil and since they revere nature, they make it a point to take only what is required. In "Other Lives," Mamang Dai talks about the struggle between the living and non-living entities on earth, and the underlying sense of respect and reverence that they possess towards each other:

"The land is a being just like us. We live the weather, share food, rice, water, salt. We go to war, kill each other with our weapons and are killed by a drowning river or an avalanche of rocks. It is a bond both cruel and kind; like brothers claiming territory. Since both are equal to the other it is a state of mutual regard, a sense of kinship" (Dai, "Other Lives" 44).

In the Adi worldview, there is no hierarchy of beings, humans and nonhumans are siblings. Dai's poem "Man and Brother" and "Man and Brother (2)" reveals the sibling-like relationship between human and non-human beings that is believed in the Adi worldview. In the footnote of "Man and Brother," Dai writes "It is a widespread belief in Arunachal Pradesh that man and tiger were born brothers. The killing of a tiger is equivalent to that of killing a man..." (Dai, "Man and Brother" 49). In the poem, a hunter waits patiently for a tiger to arrive, and when he hears somebody reaching out to him, he recognises it as the tiger:

"The tiger runs swiftly from my father's house
Calling my name.
Brother: Man brother!
Have mercy for our destiny!" (Dai, "Man and Brother" 49).

When the tiger calls the hunter his "brother" and begs for forgiveness, the hunter understands that killing his own brother—the tiger—will result in the village having to perform strict

penance for the transgression for five days. The hunter warns the tiger as a result of this insight:

“Run swiftly then my brother
Oh, my brother,
have mercy for our destiny” (Dai, “Man and Brother” 50)

The hunter's self-awareness of the worth of other living things keeps him from murdering his own sibling, the tiger. This self-realization echoes in “Man and brother (2)” when the hunter after killing the tiger, realizes his wrongful act and cries out “seeking [his] brother’s lost face” (Dai, “Man and Brother (2)” 51). The tiger sacrificed himself to win his brother laurels of courage and bravery and therefore, “Without his footprint, we would not know how to be brave” (Dai, “Man and Brother (2)” 51).

This is in contrast to Christianity, the most anthropocentric religion in the world, that believes that since man had named all animals, they established dominance over them. God has created the earth for men to be fruitful and bountiful through exploitation of all natural resources. This worldview is in strict contrast to ‘pagan’ religions as it establishes a binary opposition between man and nature and places man above nature in hierarchy. The Donyi-Polo worldview on the other hand, aligns with the Deep Ecology movement. The Norwegian thinker Arne Naess originally described it in 1972. The 1973 version's guiding ideas are as follows:

1. Nonhuman beings are valuable regardless of how beneficial they are to humans.
2. Every living thing on the planet has inherent value.
3. Aside from meeting basic necessities, mankind has no right to diminish this diversity and richness.
4. A significantly reduced human population is consistent with the growth of human life and cultures.
5. There is too much human meddling in the nonhuman world, and things are becoming worse.
6. The manner that people treat the world should be changed.
7. Instead of concentrating on materialistic gains, people should work to improve their quality of life.
8. Those who agree with the aforementioned arguments are required, either explicitly or implicitly, to attempt to bring about the required reforms through peaceful means (Ramchandra Guha).

The concept of the ‘ecological self’ is critical to the understanding of the Deep Ecology movement. Although traditionally, the maturity of an individual is assessed in terms of his relationship to his family or his society, Naess introduces the concept of the ‘ecological self’ where the immediate environment, the home in which one spends one’s life as a child, the nonhuman elements present in it, and the other living beings are considered. In her prose-poem “The Deification of Nature” (published as part of *Midsummer Survival Lyrics*), Dai talks about the importance of living beings and non-living entities and of the need to value their existence:

“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 2014, p. 53).

The poem “Be Careful How You Cut That Tree” acts as a prophetic warning to humans, forbidding them from degrading and destroying nature:

“Be careful how you cut that tree.

A dizzy blow can change the sunlight,

Alter the snaking path of a breeze;

Kill the ground with unexpected poison – heat

these things are unpredictable” (Dai, “the deification of nature” 53).

The result of ignoring such prophecies find place in Dai’s fiction too. In *The Legends of Pensam*, the felling of a tree disturbs the ancestral spirits of a tribe and tragedy befalls the entire community:

“But the big trees were brought down. The spirits of our ancestors who dwelt in these high and secret places fell with the tress. They were homeless, and so they went away. And everything had changed since then. The canopy of shelter and tradition had fallen. The wind and the sun burned our faces. We saw a strange new glimmer in the distance. Our footsteps led us down unknown paths” (Dai, *The Legends of Pensam* 42–43).

In the poem, “Small Towns and the River,” Mamang Dai emphatically asserts “The river has a soul” (Dai, “Small Towns and the River”). Again, in “The Voice of the Mountain” the poetic self’s voice becomes one with that of the mountain as the poetic speaker repeatedly uses the personal pronoun, “I”.

The Deep Ecology movement that promoted the sustainable balanced way of living an ecologically harmonious life through a reverence for all living and non-living entities bestowed upon humanity by the earth has been long practiced by tribes like the Adis of Arunachal Pradesh. Mamang Dai thus upholds to the world the ecologically sustainable culture and beliefs of her tribe, that is being marketed as new and revolutionary to the Western world, thereby asserting her voice in a world that often tends to relegate them to the periphery.

Reclamation of History

As opposed to the philosophy of Donyi-Polo, which is considered by Dai to be ‘world-spirit,’ the world-spirit or ‘geist’ as conceptualized by Georg Wilhelm Friedrich Hegel, simultaneously refers to mind, spirit, and culture and represents a collective consciousness that evolves through historical development. It is a philosophical framework that is used to understand how human consciousness develops over time. Hegel used terms like ‘weltgeist’ (world-spirit) and ‘volksgeist’ (national spirit) to explore the collective consciousness that is manifested in the human population at large and to record its progress and development through historical stages. Hegelian conception of history views the growth and development of history through dialectical methods – progression occurs through internal contradictions and tensions. Hegelian conception of history is a necessarily negative view of history – growth and development in human civilization is seen as possible only through conflicts and wars.

This nationalist, statist view of history undermines the multiplicity of histories that reside in the margins. In his seminal work, *History at the Limit of World-history*, Ranajit Guha points out how Rabindranath Tagore was much ahead of his time in acknowledging the multiplicity of histories that surround a particular event. Tagore remarks in “Sahitye Aitihāsikata” or “Historicality in Literature” that the “inaugural moment of his poetic career” escapes the framework of historicality. His uniquely subjective experiences – “seeing the dew glistening

on top of a coconut grove at sunrise, seeing a mass of dark blue clouds gathering in the sky above his ancestral house one afternoon, and seeing a cow licking the back of a foal with the affection reserved usually for her own calf” (Guha, 2003, p. 77) – made him a poet. Yet, in the history of that day, “there was no one other than myself (*kono dvitiya vyakti*) who saw those clouds in quite the same way (*shei cakkhe*, literally with the same eyes) as I did . . . Rabindranath appeared all alone in that [seeing]” (Ranjit Guha 88).

The statist narrative of history has always tried to assert hegemonic dominance of the ‘grand national history’ (‘brihat jatiyo itihaas’) over the ‘intense human history’ (‘tibro manab itihaas’). Tagore upholds the role of the poet in the presentation of history from the margins. In this respect, Tagore emerges as one of the earliest modern historiographers, who believed in histories as opposed to a singular monolithic history.

Hegelian conception of history accepts only chronologically written accounts of prosaic history as a valid form of recording history. Narratives written in poetic verse do not meet the Hegelian norm, and thus nations like India, where narratives are mostly written in poetic language, fall outside the conception of Western history. The Adi tongue thus falls outside the realm of both Western and Indian conception of history, since being a non-script language, stories and tales of events are passed down only in the form of oral narratives. Mamang Dai’s works portraying the culture, customs, traditions, and myths of her community serve as alternate narratives of history. Racial memory is preserved in the tales that are orally narrated. Dai, in “On Creation Myths and Oral Narratives,” states:

“With oral narratives, there are no reference books, and few recorded volumes in print. If you approached a village elder who might be a storyteller, he would say, “What! What kind of story, eh? How can anyone pull a story out of air, eh?”

“Yet I also know that if I persist, I will receive interesting information and know, perhaps for the first time, that the implements of weaving are a woman’s protection, that the first cotton grew out of the white feather of a kite, and that yes, women do not hunt; but when a man kills a tiger he is received at the village gate by women first, who hold out woven red cloth around him to shield the hunter from the avenging eyes of the killed animal.

“Who said this should be done? Who instructed men and women to erect a guardian gate at the entrance to every village? Who told us that the leaves and branches of certain trees are auspicious? One gateway leads to another. The Greek word *mythos* means ‘talk’ or ‘story.’ And like the original meaning of ‘story’ derived from the word ‘storehouse,’ a story begins to unfold as a storehouse of many meanings...” (Dai, “On creation myths and oral narratives”).

The documentation of those tales, including the acknowledgement of the presence of those tales, help construct a reality and a history that runs parallel to the statist conception of history. Dai records many such legends, myths, and beliefs in her works including *The Legends of Pensam*, that uphold the Adi community in the global literary space.

Mamang Dai even uses nature as the alternate epistemological framework to record history. In her poem, “The Voice of the mountain,” the poetic voice is that of the mountain who silently observes all the changes that take place in the world. “I can outline chapters of the world” (“The Voice of the Mountain”) refers to the mountain being the silent observer of human history through its ups and downs, watching how the environment changes as humans try to carve out territories “ancient and new” (“The Voice of the Mountain”). In the everchanging world that seeks to assert hegemonic dominance by negating and erasing the histories and narratives of those belonging to the peripheries, the mountain is “the chance syllable that orders the world/ instructed with history and miracles” (“The Voice of the

Mountain”). Dai does not separate violence from her writing as she writes “Peace is a falsity” (“The Voice of the Mountain”). Holding onto the memory and the stories of the Adi community, the mountain (and thus, nature) becomes “the place where memory escapes/ the myth of time” (“The Voice of the Mountain”). Nature thus, becomes the custodian of history of the tribals and Dai’s works serve to propagate and preach their truth.

Conclusion

Mamang Dai’s works serve to shed light on the culture of the Adi community of Arunachal Pradesh, and highlight their faith, Donyi-Polo, that reveals its similarity to the ecologically sustainable way of living promoted by the Deep Ecology movement. Her language and style reveal her postcolonial stance. The abundance of nature and imagery drawn from it in her works reveals how nature is intertwined with the life of the indigenous people from the North-East. Through her works, Dai keeps the racial memory of her people alive and situates her community within the grand national history of India and within the realms of global history.

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