



Ecocritical and Ecological Concerns in Literature by North East Indian Women: A Reading of Selected Poems of Mamang Dai

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Abstract :

Representations of nature and the environment have been prominent in literature and beyond since classical times. In the celebrated works of contemporary writers, the representation of nature to arouse ecological consciousness has found a significant space. The growing concerns regarding environmental issues has furthered the need for the representation of the same in literatures across the globe. The poetry from India's North East is rich in enshrining various aspects of the ecology of the region. The ecology of the native lands and search for identity, roots and exploring through the native culture formulate the major themes of poetry of the writers from this region. The mountains, the rivers, hills, flora, fauna are often celebrated in their poetry and a deep concern for the degradation of ecology is also touched upon at the same time. The love of nature is also exemplified in their writings by many poets. Mamang Dai, a prolific writer hailing from Arunachal Pradesh, born and brought up in the hills, is very deeply concerned and connected with ecology and nature. The theme of nature and a deep ecological concern is a recurring occurrence in her poetry as well as other fictional works. This paper, thus, is an attempt to study selected poems of Mamang Dai in the light of an ecocritical and an ecological perspective. The paper will also try to explore her ideas and ecological vision as a woman from the hills of North East India. The intricate relationship, shared by one's ancestral roots with one's identity and nature, is also explored through this paper.

Keywords : *Ecocriticism, Ecocritical literature, Deep Ecology, North East Indian literature, North East Indian Women, Identity*

Introduction :

Ecocriticism, as a school of literary criticism, has a much prominent role to play in the contemporary era. It cannot be argued that the

moral duties of literature include the need for reflecting contemporary issues. The growing concerns regarding environmental issues has furthered the need for the representation of the



same as well as nature in literatures across the globe. The 1960s saw the publication of Rachel Carson's *Silent Spring*, which led to a massive environmental movement in the 1980s, leading in turn to the rise of ecocriticism. Since then, it has been and continues to be an approach centred around nature, the environment and the earth. It calls for a study of literature and the environment from an interdisciplinary point of view, where literary scholars unearth eco-conscious representations in literary texts, in view of the global environmental crisis, to examine the various ways literature treats the subject of nature.

In the Indian literary scene, several writers have spectacularly portrayed nature in their celebrated works. It is important to mention here that while Ecocriticism tries to unearth the human-nature relationship in literary representations, Deep Ecology takes it a step further where "nature and other life forms are considered as valuable as human beings" (Singha 2). Coined in 1972 by Arne Naess, the phrase "Deep Ecology Movement" calls for a representation and understanding of the worth of all living forms on earth. According to Nayar, Deep Ecology proposes "a respect not only for all life forms but also towards landscapes such as rivers and mountains" (247). Such an ethic can be seen in the Indian literary scene in the literature created by women from North East India, specifically for the purpose of this paper, in the writings of Mamang Dai, a celebrated writer from Arunachal Pradesh, an ecological paradise. In her work, Dai calls for a deep respect for spectacular landscapes, bubbling rivers and streams, gushing waterfalls, vivid flowers, and the places she witnessed growing up in the embrace

of nature. She, however, also expresses her concern and laments about "the sorry state-of-affairs as regards the state of non-human lives" (Basumatary and Khiangte 2669) in contemporary times.

Objectives :

The aim of this paper is to read and analyse selected poems of Mamang Dai from an ecocritical and deep ecological perspective. The paper also aims to unearth and understand her ecological vision as a woman from North East India.

Analysis :

Dai, through her poetry, seeks to break the hierarchy wherein human beings are considered superior to other forms of life. She, like other members of her Adi tribal community, believes that human beings and other forms of life like animals, birds and trees including the rain, the clouds, the bats, etc. share a bond of kinship. In her poem "Birthplace" from *River Poems*, she writes:

We are the children of the rain
of the cloud woman,
brother to the stone and bat
in our cradle of bamboo and vine
in our long houses we slept,
and when morning came
we were refreshed. (Dai, lines 1-7)

Dai here advocates the idea that as long as human beings respected their kinship with the non-human nature, they were refreshed and had less anxiety.

The question of identity is also important here as it is intricately related to nature and the ecology of one's origin. Nature is a space whereby one can identify one's own identity. Dai's poem "An Obscure Place" clearly highlights the fact that



one can find one's ancestral roots even through the spirits of rivers, trees and mountains. "An Obscure Place" introduces us to the rich cultural heritage of Arunachal Pradesh, which is considered as obscure by many even today. The poem might also indicate the ongoing tensions of the sprawling violence due to the insurgency. It also describes the opposition between history and traditional stories, with a sense of alienation:

The history of our race begins with the place of stories

We do not know if the language we speak
Belong 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.

The lines from "An Obscure Place" above imply that the mountains act as a symbol of the poet's ancestral roots wherein she desires and longs to go back to her roots.

Her sense of pride on being a woman from the hills is deeply reflected in her work where she describes the natural landscapes, their beauty and the fond memories of her past life in Arunachal Pradesh. In her descriptions of the natural bounty of her place, ecology is presented in a lively manner. In her poem "Rain (1)" from *River Poems*, she writes:

In the rain the camellias bloom.

The incense of pine
fills the senses again. (Dai 25)

Again, in "Lilies" from *River Poems*, she paints a vivid ecological sight that reflects the beauty of nature, giving us a sense of her deep respect for nature:

Where does tenderness linger?

Six white lilies stare at me
with pollen heavy eyes.

When the sullen wind blows

A bird sings. (Dai 72)

She beautifies and glorifies nature in her poems which reflect her deep love for nature and her deep ecological vision.

Another interesting feature of Dai's writing is the perfect blending of her poetry with the effect of Ecomysticism with the help of tribal folklore, folktales and myths. According to the tribal community, there is an age-old belief that the tiger and human beings are born brothers, which again reiterates the idea of the kinship between human beings and other forms of life. In her poem "Man and Brother" from her *Midsummer Survival Lyrics*, there is a beautiful description where a tiger pleads a hunter to have mercy on him, his brother: "The tiger runs swiftly from my father's house/ Calling my name/ Brother: Man brother/ Have mercy for our destiny!" (Dai 49). This description also serves as a plea from the animal world to the human world to have mercy on them and stop all the degradation and harm they cause. As the hunter realises that he is about to kill his own brother, the tiger, and as such the entire village has to pay penance for it later, he asks the tiger to leave: "Run swiftly then my brother / Oh, my brother/ have mercy for our destiny" (Dai 50). This description, again, might be a plea to the animal world to have mercy on the human race for all the destruction caused by the humans. The use of myth to express an ecological concern is very well presented here by Dai.



Another Ecomystical depiction is observed in another poem “Wild Birds” from *River Poems* where the human voice is made to think about birds, which are two different entities yet similar connections are drawn between them.

I thought you loved me.

How sad it is,

the spring sky,

the caresses of

mist and vapour

Why do wild birds cry? (Dai, lines 1-6)

Dai beautifully combines both love and Nature and brings them together in this poem.

Another important feature of Dai's poems is Animism. She tries to draw a close connection with the various elements from the natural world like trees, rivers, stones, etc. whereby they are ushered with life and are thereby considered to be animate. Her poems are a clear portrayal of the ecological elements as a true animist. The fact that she is a believer of Gods is very clear in the poem “The Balm of Time” from her collection *The Balm of Time*, where she writes that she believes in Gods and the spirits of the forest and the river. In the poem, she expresses her ecological concern and beliefs in the tribal pantheon of Gods, who are regarded as elements of nature. By glorifying nature as God, Dai also ushers in a sense of the supremacy of nature, giving it a divine pedestal. This idea is seen further in her poem “Small Towns and the River”, where she likens the small towns by the river to the dwelling place of the Gods: “In small towns by the river/ we all want to walk with the gods”.

In the poem “Birthplace”, animism is clearly depicted with the use of vivid natural images that animate the rain, the clouds and the bat. Animism

is also observed in the poem “The Voice of the Mountain” as can be seen in the extract below :

I know, I know these things

as rocks knows, burning in the sun's embrace,

about clouds, and sudden rain;

As I know a cloud is a cloud,

A cloud is this uncertain pulse that sits over my heart.

In the end the universe yields nothing

except a dream of permanence.

peace is a falsity

A moment of rest comes after long combat.

In her poetry, Dai also highlights the idea of interdependence between man and nature. Human beings often fail to acknowledge this interdependence, thus posing a threat to the non-human world. Dai's deep understanding of this interdependence shows her echoing similar sentiments to Rachel Carson who, in *Silent Spring*, writes that the web of life is made up of intricate relationships between the human and non-human world. In “Egret River” from *River Poems*, Dai writes: “Now I know/ The forest is my home/ the mist my breath” (Dai, lines 21-23). Dai considers the forest as the home of mankind, wherein human beings breathe the mist, which is true both literally and metaphorically. In “Be careful how you cut that tree” from her *Midsummer Survival Lyrics*, she explains how cutting a tree can lead to a change in climate, which portrays her understanding of the interdependence between man and nature, both scientifically and metaphorically. Referring to the trees as “priests” and “gods”, Dai shows how “the felling of a tree can have serious repercussions in the human world and man might not be able to recuperate from the aftermath” (Singha 7). She writes:



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 64)

Dai's poetry also reflects her concern for the degradation of ecology. In the poem "The Sorrow of Women", she portrays the silent women whose voice is muted by the so-called male counterparts or the patriarchal society.

My love, what shall I do?
I am thinking how I may lose you
to war, and big issues
more important than me.
...
and they are taking about escape,
and liberty, men and guns,
ah! The urgency for survival.
But what will do
not knowing the sorrow of women.

Here, the narrative voice might be the voice of nature. For survival, the men have taken to arms. This anthropocentric portrayal clearly indicates the widening gap between man and the natural world. Humans have become so engrossed with deciding their own fates that they have failed to spare a minute to think about the natural world. This ultimately has resulted in widening the gap between the two, thereby leading to ecological crisis. Her subtle comparison between nature and the silent woman also presents ecofeminist concerns. Her ecofeminist stance continues in "The Voice of the Mountain" as she identifies herself with nature, portraying her bodily connections with it. It is a deep portrayal of the relationship between nature and the human body:

"I am the woman lost in translation/ who survives,
with happiness to carry on/ I am the breath that
opens the mouth of the canyon, the sunlight on
the tips of trees; ... I am the sleep in the mind of
the mountain."

In "The Voice of the Mountain", she also laments the destruction of the natural world as she believes that depletion of the natural world will lead to loss of one's identity. As such, in this quest for identity, it is one's sole responsibility to protect the natural world. The description goes likewise: 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.

Here, she paints a picture of the intricate relationship shared by human being and nature. She portrays how human beings repeat acts of destruction, using and abusing natural resources in a selfish manner. Since the tribal communities of North East India are closely related to nature, such destruction of natural resources distorts their identities rooted so deep in the tribal soil. She, as such, mourns the destruction of the flora and fauna of her land.

Furthermore, the poet laments on the fact of losing one's faith with the advent of Christianity. She even describes the relationship shared by nature, native people and their identity which is almost in a deteriorating condition. The juxtaposition of "weeping" and "a waving grassland" in "An Obscure Place" is powerful here



as Dai uses nature to express her sorrow on the loss of faith, and in turn identity:

The world of strangers have led us into a mist
Deeper than one we left behind
Weeping like a waving grassland
Where the bones of our father are buried
Surrounded by thoughts of beauty.

In “Even in the Season of Chrysanthemums” from *Midsummer Survival Lyrics*, Dai juxtaposes the modern, crumbling, polluted, corrupted and commercialised world against the natural world of flora and fauna. She is distressed by the death and cruelty of the modern city. Even in a season where chrysanthemums are blooming, “the city is shocked, confused and has closely huddled together” (Wani 104).

In the poem “The Deification of Nature” from *Midsummer Survival Lyrics*, she describes the significance of mountains, trees and insects and that we need to respect and value their existence. She shares the belief of her tribal community that everything has life and any damage done to life brings in severe consequences. She challenges the destruction caused by modern man by felling trees and crushing mountains with explosives. She, thus, questions:

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 53)

Dai, through her poetry, also touches on the idea of the encroachment of human beings into the natural habitat of flora and fauna. In “Midday Sun” from *Midsummer Survival Lyrics*, she

describes a rhinoceros struggling to find a resting place, and in turn questioning as to where is the “place of rivers and wet grass” (Dai 67). Similarly, in “The Face of the Tiger” from the same collection, she describes a team of hunters preparing for a tiger-hunt asking each other why the tiger was “moving into the territories of men” (Dai 48) and destroying their crops, unaware of the fact that their encroachment of the tiger’s natural habitat had pushed the tiger out into the open.

Dai also acknowledges the supreme power of Nature in her poetry as opposed to the modern idea of the supremacy of human beings over other natural forms. In her poem *Rivers* from *Midsummer Survival Lyrics*, she acknowledges the sublime power of rivers, writing that the rivers can do anything, including “capsize[ing] boats” (Dai 71). In “Writing”, Dai considers human beings as “small silhouettes” (Dai 2) when compared to the grand mountains. Dai’s philosophy, here, is similar to that of Arne Naess, a founding figure of the “Deep Ecology Movement”, who advocated the supremacy of natural forms like rivers and mountains: “From the mountains, we learn modesty; their size makes us feel small and humble, and so we participate in their greatness” (Naess 17).

Conclusion :

In conclusion, it can be said that Mamang Dai, through her poetry, has splendidly put forward her ecological vision as a woman from North East India. The numerous literary and metaphorical representations of nature in her poetry have established her as one of the major ecocritical and ecological writers of India. Nature is central in her poetry. Besides describing the bounty of



nature, she also touches on ecofeminist and ecological concerns. She also reveals the mystical quality of nature through ecomysticism. Her strong voice also exposes the selfishness of the modern capitalist world and expresses her deep ecological concern for the biodiversity of Arunachal Pradesh and the wider world. She believes in the supreme power of nature and like other members of her Adi tribe, she considers all entities of nature as sacred entities. Her poetry

seeks to break the hierarchy where human beings are at the top of the ladder and like other deep ecologists, she aims, through her poetry, to establish the value and worth of all creatures in nature. Her strong voice of protest, owing to her upbringing in the midst of nature, calls for a harmonious relationship amongst all species on earth. Dai's poetry is an attempt at reminding people that it is high time to change and avoid a looming ecological catastrophe.

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