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Proclaiming Heterogeneity, Autonomizing Ethnicity, Centralizing the Marginalized: Postcolonial Rage in Mamang Dai's Poem "The Voice of the Mountain"

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Abstract

Mamang Dai's poem "The Voice of the Mountain" vehemently resists the power dynamics that have culturally, historically and nationally marginalized North-East India, especially Arunachal Pradesh. This paper aims to analyze how the poem explores postcolonial themes such as decolonization, historical revisionism, cultural hybridity, assimilation of identity, and the representation of oppressed voices. This study demonstrates how Dai's poetry creates a counter-narrative that asserts autonomy, embraces ethnicity and reclaims the heritage of her community. Ultimately, this research highlights the significance of Mamang Dai's works in the arena of postcolonial literature, and their relevance in contemporary debates on nation, nationality and nationalism.

Keywords: *Dai, colonization, mountain, resistance, culture, hegemony*

Introduction

In the fifteenth century, the age of exploration in Europe initiated the wrath of two deadly diseases: smallpox and colonization. The former affected one's immune system, and after an endeavour of a hundred years, a successful cure was found. The latter, however, spread through invisible germs that invaded a nation's body politic[1], rendering it sick and vulnerable to the machinations of utterly diseased dictators. It claimed sacrifices of not just lives, but also of identity, independence, and integrity. After two hundred years of struggle, when India finally stood on the verge of a remedy, the British took the "Kohinoor" as a souvenir, and as a parting gift, planted a new variant of the same, rotten colonialism deep into the unfathomable crevices of a million minds. The contagious greed of supremacy gave rise to the monster of internal colonization. Writing from the periphery of postcolonial India, Mamang Dai's poetry offers a relentless resistance to the power politics that determine the relationship between the Indian midland and the geographically aloof, culturally othered North-Eastern region. It is a tough task to pick stanzas from the poem and interpret them thematically, as each line introduces a new concept, a newer tone of protest. The poem presents not only the historical dilapidation of Arunachal Pradesh, the state Dai is from, but also candidly exposes the neglect of the other six North-Eastern states: Mizoram, Manipur, Nagaland, Meghalaya, Sikkim,

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Tripura, and Assam. “The Voice of the Mountain” functions as an attempt to vaccinate generations of colonized victims against the madness of imperialism.

In the poem, Dai places the persona of the mountain at a "high platform"(line 1), where, from a vantage point, it has seen so much of coerced change, hegemonic subjugation, moral corruption, imperial sludge and colonial dirt flow down the "big river"(line 2) of time, that it "can outline the chapters of the world"(line 5). And the world of North East India is divided into chapters of centre-margin binary, racism, subalternation, endangerment of ethnicity, and state-sanctioned violence. Arunachal Pradesh can minutely map the "crossing crisscrossing" (line 2) of religious propagandists, capitalist bandits in the guise of messiahs, and nationalist sentiment ticklers, upon its soil. They suffered mass conversion into Christianity under the colonisers, falling victim to the empty promise of being provided with safety, comfort, and enlightenment. In the poem “Blood of Others”, Naga poet Temsula Ao documents :

"We listened in confusion
To the new stories and too soon
Allowed our knowledge of other days
To be trivialised into taboo..
…..
Schooled our minds to become
The ideal tabula rasa
On which the strange intruders
Began scripting a new history."
(lines 12 - 29)

And their colonial successor- the national homogenizers[2], repeated the same, malicious corruption of the interpolation of nativity, only in a doubly torturous measure, wrapped in the glossy cover of civic development. The dominant narrative remained the same: the incomprehensible must either be commingled or be annihilated. Following the independence of India, many North-Eastern states started separatist movements, claiming autonomy over regional governance and freedom of cultural expression. In 1966, the Mizo National Front Uprising[3] was the first major liberation strike. But the government of India utilized it as an example to strike terror upon those who dare to defy the nation-state, inflicting brutal violence and political conspiracy upon Mizoram. In her poem "An Obscure Place", Dai explains -

"If there is no death the news is silent.
If there is only silence, we should be disturbed"
(lines 17-18)

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The tribes of Arunachal Pradesh were bestowed with the false crown of exoticism. But from the colonizer's perspective, the exotic is the regressive, and the regressive never determines the norm for those occupying the hierarchical summit. The first assault of otherization was hurled upon nature. The onslaught of mindless capitalist consumerism was meticulously schemed to further lead the erosion and degradation of the bio-diverse environment, making Arunachal an open treasure chest for economic despotism. In the curling smoke of industrialization, the pristine "star diagram" (line 36) disappeared from the sky. Manipuri poet Robin, S. Ngangom's poem "Everywhere I Go" is an open inquiry towards the outsiders regarding the truth behind their intentions:

"I'm the anguish of slashed roots,
The fear of the homeless,
And the desperation of former
kisses.
How much land does my enemy
need?"
(lines 32-35)

"The Voice of the Mountain" provides a striking counter discourse against this colonial antagonism towards nature. The tribal community Dai belongs to, is the largest tribe of Arunachal, known as the Adi[4] tribe. They harbour the philanthropic philosophy that asserts that all animate and inanimate entities: birds, mountains, animals, rivers, pastures and insects exist on this earth as rightfully as humans, and are equally sacred. This worldview is known as "Donyi-Polo". Literally, "Donyi" means "Sun", and "Polo" means "Moon". "Donyi-Polo" is the corporeal manifestation of a supreme deity. In an article titled "The Nature of Faith and Worship Among the Adis", Dai interprets it to be the "world spirit"(p. 87). This belief system is intrinsically entwined with ecological harmony and its preservation, unlike the coloniser's Biblical wisdom that instructs mankind to "…fill the earth and subdue it; and have dominion over the fish of the sea and over the birds of the air and over every living thing that moves upon the earth" (Genesis 1:28). This lethal, Eurocentric view of nature has been countered in the poem, by presenting the mountain as the creator, the preserver, and the destroyer, highlighting nature's spiritual importance that is native to the mountain tribes. Dai critiques the ethical discrepancy of the country, as the very same India that takes pride in a few eco-feminist movements, such as "Chipko"[5] or "Save Narmada"[6], has such a destructive attitude towards the ancient eco-humanism of Arunachal Pradesh.

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To make matters worse within the dominant national imagination, the North Eastern population is often frolicked to be Nepalese, Chinese or referred to by inappropriate, denigrating labels as "Chinki"[7]. Robin S. Ngangom, in his poem “Everywhere I Go”, writes -

"Those who speak the language of progress
Call my homeland a mendicant state
Not knowing its landlocked misery,
Its odd splendour.

And no one knows who picks up its bodies.”
(lines 23-27)

To counter this new form of racism in postcolonial India that has resulted in widespread alienation of the tribals in their own land, Dai empowers her people with a strong sense of autonomous ethnic identity that could resist and subvert the homogenizing tendencies of the national ethnography. She provides a non-violent symbolic discourse to highlight the height of political deprecation the North East endures. For generations, Arunachal Pradesh has dealt with tribal war and communal clashes. Hence, the government enacted AFSPA (Armed Forces Special Powers Act) to maintain public order in disturbed areas. Ironically, the protector became the perpetrator as there was no savagery left that AFSP did not commit: assault, arson, deforestation, demolition of property, and embezzlement. India's seven sister states had to sacrifice the honour of sisterhood as countless rape cases committed by the army still remain unresolved. In 2004, following the alleged gangrape and murder of a female Manipuri activist named Thangjam Manorama, Manipuri women stood protesting against the AFSP, with the gut-wrenching slogan- “Indian Army rape us” (Biswas). The nation-state replied with even more violence and a silencing propaganda. For the mountains, "Peace"(line 26) has always been an evident "falsity"(line 26) but never a deceptive lie in the disguise of truth. Compared to the superhuman inhumanity of the military vehemence that is stamped as permissible, the bloodshed of tribal unrest has been compared to "blood of peonies" (line 33). Their lives remain "forever ancient and new" (line 11). The same old venture to revive and relive traditions is ever interrupted by imposed modernity that aspires to gulp down the warmth of belongingness. The promised illumination never arrives. In a single life, they live the "many lives"(line 14) of the ostracised other, the legally terrorised, allegedly uncouth, uncultured hooligans. Cherrie L. Chhangte, a poet from Mizoram, brilliantly captures the alienation effect on the North-East, in the poem “What Does an Indian Look Like”:

“You look at me, and you see
My eyes, my skin, my language, my faith.
You dissect my past, analyse my present

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Predict my future and build my profile.
I am a curiosity, an 'ethnic' specimen.
Politics, history, anthropology, 0
Your impressive learning,
All unable to answer the fundamental
question—
"What does an Indian look like?'
—An Indian looks like me, an Indian is Me."
(lines 17-25)

Dai exposes the haphazard, moth-eaten political cartography of India, where the orientation of Indians into a standard Indianness brings only internal partition and no national unity; only the chaos of abandonment and no solace of identity.

The rubric of postcolonial literature undergoes a further revaluation as Dai subverts colonial linguistics and structure in the language of the colonizers. Having never officially written in any other medium but English, the language becomes her very own intrinsic voice of revolt and irony to conspicuously expose the grotesquerie of linguistic imposition on Arunachal Pradesh. Even the structure of the poem flows freely like a river, eluding generic punctuation, rhythm and rhetoric. Just as the British foisted the English language for imperial convenience, mainland India too normalizers the dominant Hindi tongue as the lingual gateway to enter the central historiography. Even in a sovereign land, "such acts"(line 10) of the negation of the fundamental right of free speech, are "repeated" as the tribals speak in "changing languages" (line 11) to be socially a part of India they are already a geographical part of. Ngangom's poem "The First Rain" questions:

"Can poetry be smuggled like guns or drugs?
We've drawn our borders with blood.
Even to write in our mother tongue
We cut open veins and our tongues"
(lines 54-57)

But any other language, no matter how historically enriched, cannot capture the essence of one's mother tongue and its creations, which, for Arunachal Pradesh, is the oral tradition: the stories and rhymes passed down generations. Dai mourns this loss of their traditions, as she writes:

"The words of strangers have led us into a mist
Deeper than the one we left behind"
(lines 25-26)

Arunachal Pradesh does not have an official language. Each tribe has its own dialect, grammar and natural linguistic evolution. Dai's collection of short stories titled "The Legends of Pensam" documents and celebrates the oral tales of the land. "Pensam" is an Arunachali

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word that means “in between”. Arunachal Pradesh has more than fifty dialects, yet, apart from other reasons, a breach in communication is one of the reasons for tribal unrest. But the government, instead of resolving internal struggles, exacerbates them even more, turning the people of the same state against each other. This dirty politics has been repeated again and again in history to corner the tribal population even more, making tribal unrest an irresolvable issue. Their rightful plea for national aid has been rejected time and again. Hence Dai says, “I also leave my spear leaning by the tree and try to make a sign” (line 12), inaugurating a new generation of citizens who will no longer make enemies within their own homes; a generation that knows its true enemies. Contrary to the nation's obstinate belief, she resuscitates and reconstructs the silences and gaps of their traditional narrative and documents them in a neo-literary style that rejects state-approved supremacy of certain languages and hegemonic disparity of the tribal colloquy. Dai inverts the scale of semantic paramountcy as the marginalised know both the centre and the margin. Most North-East Indians can speak at least two Indian languages alongside English. But the self-entitled majority are uneducated about India's cultural diversity. In the beginning of the second stanza, she reduces the homogenizer to a pathetic briber who, out of his own lexical ignorance, brings an unsuitable "gift of fish" (line 8) to a land of rivers. The language they want to subdue is the very language that pinpoints their illiteracy. Even though those "lost in translation” (line 38) are absent in the administrative recital of the nation, between the lines of progression and regression, the tales of Arunachal Pradesh exist as they always have, with its episodes of joys and despair, nationalism and betrayal, crescendo and quietude. The distinct accent and pronunciation of tribal languages that the country parodies and demeans as an incoherent "transfer of symbols" (line 14); for Dai, becomes the blaring sign of postcolonial defence. If, by "chance"(line 16) her countrymen strove to fathom even a "syllable"(line 16) the people of the mountain utter, they would realise that the languages they have defamed, have enough narrative strength to reinstruct history, and miraculously rectify the malevolent state apparatus.

The core of postcolonial literature lies in the painful and restorative, relocating and re-enacting endeavour of both personal and collective memory. Dai weaponizes her poem to inscribe a counter memory for Arunachal Pradesh against the official memory of India. Foucault's[8] concept of the archaeology of knowledge defines that a formal archive of memory is a system of rules, practices and discourses that determines what can be said and how. Under the claws of internal colonization, the North-East has been mercilessly denied the right

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to represent its own culture. Mizo poet Lalrinmawii Khiangte, in her poem titled "For a Better Tomorrow", uses excessive ellipses to denote the gaps between what is promised and what is granted:

"Courage…moral courage… physical courage..."
mental courage…discernment…for withstanding…
complacency…conformity…yet censoring glare…
of…associations in community…church…
government…double standards rampant everywhere!"
(lines 7-11)

The worst manifestation of this political chauvinism is that the schemes of fruitless external development are granted by the government, but any attempt by Arunachal Pradesh for internal evolution has been disenfranchised. A region ripe with infantile possibilities is nipped in the bud. While an Indian basks in the manipulated glory of independence, a tribal Indian dies "at the edge of the world"(line 33) as a namesake citizen. The poem challenges the stereotypical encyclopaedic knowledge of the nation-state by presenting Arunachal's raw and collective memory as its only authentic cultural repository. Throughout the poem, the land of the mountains has been painted as an elemental, eternal, momentous, changeless space, contrasted with the threatening surge of change. Its voice merges with "the desert and the rain" (line 16), the "sea waves" (line 15), and "sunlight on the tips of trees" (line 40), signifying the hereditary self-sufficiency of its people. The evergreen remembrance of their roots "escapes the myth of time"(line 42) that devours everything in its course. No matter how much the Indian heartland imposes monochromatic gloom upon Arunachal Pradesh, it still remains the land "where the colour drains from heaven" (line 4). Generations of mass Christianisation fail to erase the ethno-spirituality of its tribes. Amidst the trauma of cultural displacement and diaspora, the North-East invents and reinvents ways of keeping their ethnicity alive. In the poem "One of these Decades", Naga poet Monalisa Changkija writes:

"We will gather around the fire
On moonlit nights as did our forefathers
And silence the gunfire with our songs
Loud and clear across our green hills
In rhythm with all humanity
To keep our date with destiny."
(lines 18-23)

By invoking "particles" of ancestral reminiscences that "clutch and cling" (line 22), Dai asserts resistance to historical amnesia, winning the tug of war of "end and hope" (line 35). The poem becomes a rectified palimpsest over the illicit palimpsestic memory of India.

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The post-colonial resistance in "The Voice of the Mountain" finds its culmination in reformulating and relaunching the imperialists' silencing agenda against imperialism itself. Colonization is carried out under the chokehold of contradicting context and conversation. Dai utilizes the same tactic to re-theorize the protohistory of the periphery. In the poem, the marginal becomes the mainstream, as it comforts the disturbed and disturbs the comfortable. Against the constrained inclusionary jingoism with exclusionary motives, she introduces the most simplified version of nationalism that begins with honouring and unapologetically identifying with one's origins. All attempts to jumble their different aesthetics in the "estuary"(line 2) of acculturation, are met with resilient revolt, mighty and lofty as "mountain peaks" (line 14) . Arunachali poet Ayinam Ering's poem "I am a Tree" accurately captures the resilience of the Arunacahli communities:

"So what if fate
Decides to leave my roots entangled?
I'm alive, from inside
And I've the courage
To keep growing while confined"
(lines 10-15)

The deceptive offering of a new sunrise of advancement is rejected as they prefer to be "the wild bird that sits in the west" (line 18): solemn and free. Even though Arunachal Pradesh finds itself at the receiving end of the violence on three fronts- from the states, the militants, and a corresponding escalation of violence within its own homes, it still struggles and survives, "with happiness to carry on" (line 37) and pass on to the generations to come. After all, for its people, revolution and inborn radicalism are as lucid as knowing that "a cloud is a cloud is a cloud" (line 24).

End Notes..

1. The body politic is a metaphorical interpretation that imagines a nation-state as a physical body and describes it in terms of human attributes.
2. Homogenization is popularly a scientific term, but in the sociological context, it is used to indicate the forced assimilation of socio-cultural differences.
3. The Mizo National Front Uprising was against the government of India, as it demanded the independence of Mizoram. Its revolutionary sentiments greatly affected the other states of North-East India as well.
4. The name Adi means "hill" or "mountain". The Sanskrit connotation is not applicable in this context
5. The Chipko Movement started in the year 1973, in the Himalayan regions of Uttarakhand (erstwhile Uttar Pradesh). The Hindi word "Chipko" means "to cling" or "hugging". To resist deforestation, tribal women stood hugging the trees and did not

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cease doing so, even before the threat of chainsaws and axes and eventually protected the woodlands.

6. The Save Narmada Movement began in 1985 to protest the construction of large dams on the Narmada River, especially the Sardar Sarovar Dam.
7. “Chinki” is racial, urban slang, used to mock the facial features, especially the monolid and hooded eyes of North-East Indians.
8. Michel Foucault (1926-1984) was a French historian, philosopher, and author.

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