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Landscape and Myths: Towards an Eco Critical Reading of the Selected Poems of Mamang Dai

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Abstract:

North East Indian English poetry is marked by a unique presence of nature and environment. The beauty of the landscape enriched with different species of flora and fauna, mighty rivers, high mountain ranges add on a vibrant culture and tradition existing among the tribal of North East. It shows rich ethnic diversity of the region. Again there is mysticism associated with the natural landscape tries to assert their identity. The relationship between man and nature in Indian English writing, more specifically from North East, has been depicted by a handful of writers of the region. Ecological consciousness is one of the dominant themes of contemporary poetry in English from North-East India. Ecological motifs, images, symbols are located dominantly thereby rendering beauty and aesthetics to their poetry. In the present paper we make an attempt at exploring the representation of natural landscape as well as myths in a few selected poems of one of the most distinguished poets of north east Mamang Dai whose works strongly reflect Ecological consciousness.

Keywords: Ecology, Ecological Consciousness, Myth, Identity.

1.0. Introduction:

Ecocritical reading critically evaluates the relation of literary discourse /text to ideas of nature, wilderness, natural setting etc. It is about the study of the relationship between literature and the physical environment. Cheryl Glotfelty in her book *The Ecocriticism Reader* (1996) defines 'ecocriticism as the study of the relationship between literature and environment' (Glotfelty xix). The aim of the ecocritical study is to restore the environment and protect it from the dire consequences of human actions which are damaging the whole planet. Ecocriticism stresses on the intimate relations between word and world, art and nature, book and the earth. It examines how the literary discourses represent the physical or the external world and how moral questions about human interaction with nature are evaluated. According to Glotfelty, ecocriticism is directed towards an earth centered approach where ecological concerns are of primary issue.

The word ecocriticism traces back its origin to William Ruckert's essay *Literature and Ecology: an Experiment in Ecocriticism* (1978). It is a discipline that is directed towards more ecological literacy in any literary work. The term is derived from the Greek words- *eco-oikos* and *krites* which mean 'house judge'. As such ecocriticism deals with the expression of judgment upon the writings which delineates relation between nature and man. Pramod K

Nayar in his book *Contemporary Literary and Cultural Theory* (2013) mentioned ecocriticism as a critical mode that looks at the representation of nature and landscape texts. The more focus is paying particular attention to attitudes towards 'nature' and the rhetoric employed when speaking about it. To quote Nayar,

“It aligns itself with ecological activism and social theory with the assumption that the rhetoric of cultural texts reflects and informs material practices towards the environment, while seeking to increase awareness about it and linking itself (and literary texts) with other ecological sciences and approaches” (2013: 242).

As a quite new movement that began in the late 20th century its origin can be traced back to the ancient times. In American literature ecocriticism originates from Norman Foerster's *Nature in American Literature* (1923). Ralph Waldo Emerson's *Nature* (1836) is the first significant work of nature writing. Moreover the origin of ecological writing in contemporary American literature refers back to 19th century American transcendentalists Ralph Waldo Emerson, Margaret Fuller and Henry David Thoreau. In England it originates its bearing on the British Romanticists of the 1790s, from John Ruskin Bond's *Modern Painter Volume III* (1856) and William Wordsworth's *Preface to the Lyrical Ballads*. The founding figure is that of critic Jonathan Bate with his key text *Romantic Ecology: Wordsworth and the Environmental Tradition* (1991). Infact the ecocritical notes are observed in one of the finest poets of the Romantic Age of English literature- William Wordsworth also known as 'lake poet.' His works reflect a reaction to the city life and grime and harsh reality of industrialization. Through his poems he wants to glorify nature and landscape in order to highlight the relationship between man and environment. Thus to quote lines from Wordsworth's *Tintern Abbey* (1798),

But Oft, in lonely rooms, and amid the din
Of towns and cities, I have owed to them,
In hours of weariness, sensations sweet.....
Nature never did betray the heart that loved her. (Tintern Abbey).

Raymond Williams *The Country and City* (1985) - the foundational text of ecocriticism, discusses more accurately the notion of nature, the countryside and city in English literature of 18th century. He has tried to demonstrate how the age (18th century) worked with the notion of culture and nature, other than exploring the environmental aspects of the literature of the age.

The relationship between man and nature in Indian English writing, more specifically from North East, has been depicted by a handful of writers of the region. Ecological consciousness is one of the dominant themes of contemporary poetry in English from North-East India. Ecological motifs, images, symbols are located dominantly thereby rendering beauty and aesthetics to their poetry. Their poetry enshrines the basic Indian ethos and values of nature so as to live in harmony with it. The poets strongly advocates preservation of the ecology of the region as they believe that it is a means by which one can preserve one's own land,

tradition, culture and identity. There is an abundance of nature imageries in all these nature poems. Nature poses itself as a unique identity and to harm nature is a threat to identity of the people whose glory is manifested only in natural objects of the world. Through the spirits of trees and rivers and mountains, one can find the ancestral roots and search for their identity. To quote Chandra and Das,

“Indian English poetry from Northeastern part of India is rich in enshrining various aspects of ecology of the region. It has been a fashion with the poets of the region to celebrate the ecological glory of the region and their ecological awareness. The ruthless act of deforestation and oppression upon the Mother Nature in various ways by destroying the serenity of the nature, obliterating the natural environment, killing rare birds and animals and distorting the landscape and biodiversity, have been sharply reacted upon by these poets” (2007: 35).

Chingangbam, Anupama remarks that poetry of the region is “always marked by a unique presence of nature” in which nature sometimes forms as “a simple backdrop but more often as spirits and souls, playing an active role in the artistic creation” (2013: 59).

1.1. Landscape and Myths in Mamang Dai’s Poems:

Mamang Dai is a celebrated poet from Arunachal Pradesh, a state of the North Eastern part of India. She was born in 1957 in a small town in Arunachal Pradesh called Pasighat in East Siang District. She left the civil services career to pursue her career in journalism and as a writer. She has written two novels named *The Legends of Pensam* and *Stupid Cupid*, two volumes of poetry, *River Poems* and *The Balm of Time* and two illustrated books of folklore, *The Sky Queen* and *Once upon a Moon Time*. She was conferred the Padma Shree award for her contribution to the field of literature and education in the year 2011.

Arunachal Pradesh is the easternmost state of India, bordering China, Myanmar and Bhutan. It is abundantly gifted with the bounties of nature. As its very name means ‘the mountain of the sun’, Arunachal Pradesh experiences sunrise earlier than any other Indian state. It is one of the twenty-five biodiversity hotspots of the world. There are twenty-six tribes with over one hundred and ten sub-clans, each with a different language or dialect, Adi being one of them. (Dai 2006: xi). The land is occupied with different species of flora and fauna, mighty rivers, high mountain ranges and along with these varied tribes and their different languages; there exists a vibrant culture and tradition adding to more ethnic diversity. Most of Dai’s poems are marked by the occurrence of mountains, hills, deep forests, rivers and other natural objects. The landscape of the region along with its different myths is abundant in her works. YD Thongchi, another celebrated writer from the region remarked that ‘Mamang Dai is firmly rooted with the soil of her birth place. Her heart was always in consonance with the rivers, mountains, trees, jungles, rituals, legends, mythology, dances, villages, prayer flags of her ‘dear abode, Arunachal Pradesh.’ (Vohra 2013: 2). Even the Indian traditional value is marked by ecological consciousness since ancient times. The inhabitants of the region believe

that the spirit of the rivers, mountains and forests are the roots of their identity. In one of her poems, **An Obscure Place**, she reflects on this.

The History of our race begins with the place of stories
We do not know if the language we speak
belongs to a written past
Nothing is certain
There are Mountains, Oh! There are Mountains
We climbed every slope, we slept by the river
But do not speak of victory yet. (Misra 2011:5)

On the symbolism of mountains in '**An Obscure Place**', Vohra (2013: 47) states that, "The mountain thus not only embodies the collective consciousness of hope of a people but also embodies the fears and lost expectations in an increasingly complicated and changing society".

She is much concerned about the deteriorating relationship in the wake of capitalism and consumerism that pose as a threat to tribal life. She seems to value the traditional tribal beliefs in close proximity with the ecology and the environment. There is a recurring presence of land in her poetry in order to show her affiliation to a small town surrounded by hills where she comes across mountains and forest, river crossings and rough roads more. In her poem '**Ties**' in the "**River Poems**" (Dai, 2004) she talks about the close affinity with her homeland.

There are ties
we do not talk about.
I confuse you with my penance,
but there are the secrets
of my clenched heart.

Again there is mysticism associated with the natural landscape. The traditional belief system endows nature with more lively spirits. Every natural object has a soul. One cannot possess a land or dispose it. S/he has to perform certain rituals in order to propitiate the spirit of the land, so that the soul of the owner may become one with the spirit of the land.

The river has a soul.
In the summer it cuts through the land
like a torrent of grief. Sometimes,
sometimes, I think it holds its breath
seeking a land of fish and stars (Dai 2003: 23).

As regards the use of the concept of myth in Mamang Dai's poems we observe that she recounts many legends and myths associated with the life of her community i.e., the Adis of

Siang valley in Arunachal Pradesh. The orally transmitted myths are documented in her works like, *Arunachal Pradesh: the Hidden Land* and *The Legends of Pensam*. In an interview with Ananya Guha, another poet from north east, she says,

I am tribal, and the geography, landscape, our myths, stories, all this has shaped my thoughts. (Dai 2013)

The poets of this region use myth and nature in their works abundantly. Being deeply rooted in their past, these poets speak about their history and their past, the land and its people, its myths and rituals, culture and tradition, festivals and dances. Legends are portrayed with the “intensity of reality and reality is portrayed with the intensity of longing for a vanished past” (Dai 2006). This is reflected on the following lines from her poem “**An Obscure Place**”.

The history of our race
begins with the place of stories.
We do not know if the language we speak
belongs to written past. (Dai 2006)

In the above lines, Mamang Dai talks about the mystery of the origins of the people of her region. They are very much conscious of their obscure recorded history about their antecedents. Their historical past and migration routes are layered with mystery. Although there are no written records available, yet their stories have been orally transmitted from generation to generation over the ages.

In one of her poems ‘**Images**’ in ‘River’ Poems (2004) Mamang Dai projects the myth which has social relevance. To cite few lines here,

Drop the rainbow down,
the rain is potent drink
for spirits seeking heavenly brides.

According to a traditional folk story known as Sherdukpen's story, a tribe from Arunachal Pradesh, rainbows are “four water-spirits, white, black, yellow and red, who live in springs among the hills and from time to time wander across the heavens for ever seeking wives as lovely as themselves. The rainbow is the path of blended colours that they make across the sky” (Elwin 1958). Thus the myths associated with each and every natural phenomenon is intricately weaved into her poetry.

The study of the myths is also well depicted in her poems “**Tapu**” and “**Man and Brother**”. Tapu is a dance performed by the male members of the Adi community.

that dying is not so hard
if the image survives.

when the wind is young
sow celebration,
seize the branch of lightening,
dress the thorn wood stem (Dai, 2003)
for conception.

Today this is viewed as a ‘war dance performed to exercise malevolent spirits, but once there was a belief that women who had borne no son could put on male attire and join the dancers in the hope of conceiving a son’. The myth is that of women wear warrior’s dresses and also joins the male members in order to be blessed with a son.

Then there is the myth of man and tiger brotherhood, the belief of many tribal communities in Arunachal Pradesh- Adis, Nyshis etc. They believe that tigers and human beings are born brothers. They are united with one another though both of them have developed different physical features. This relationship is depicted by Mamang Dai in her poem “**Man and Brother**”:

The tiger runs swiftly from my father’s house calling my name.
Brother! Man Brother!
Have mercy for our destiny. (Dai, “Man and Brother,” (2003: 22)

According to the traditional tribal belief, man and tiger are born as inherent brothers. The killing of a tiger is equal to that of the killing of a man and the rituals associated with it are rigorous and stern. The poem has a deeper meaning. It delivers a social message against the destruction of the ecology. Her belief in the tribal pantheon of Gods and mystery of environment ecology which fosters a forest faith in her is reflected in the following lines.

Yes, I believe in Gods,
In the forest faith
of good and evil,
spirits of the river
and the dream world
of the dawn. (Dai 2000 (a): 3)

Mamang Dai in her article “The Nature of Faith and Worship among the Adis” remarked that the great forest, the mountains and the environment shaped the consciousness of the Adi people. This had lead them to decorate the Pator Gate (A gate made of leaves and branches and considered holy) with arrows tipped with ginger and the sacred branches of the ‘Taan’ tree to consecrate it against evil forces. Thus to quote Dai,

“The Pator is the guardian gate at the entrance to any Adi village, and it is believed that once you are over the threshold and within the protective circle of the village where the good spirit ‘Gumin Soin’ is propitiated no harm would befall you” (2004: 91).

1.2. Conclusion:

Thus nature, natural landscape have repeated occurrence in the poetry North East Indian English poets. They are very much aware of the ecology of the region and the intricate relationship that exists between man and nature. Through the use of myths and legends through different imagery Mamang Dai asserts the root of tribal identity in her poems. She is very much conscious of the natural landscapes of her homeland thereby capturing the essential beauty of the land, when that beauty is almost on the brink of being wiped out at the onset of modern industrialization. Through most of her poems, with different images, she tries to weave the myths of the nature, the traditional tribal beliefs as such. Nature has a mystical presence in her works and she wants to explore through the mysteries of nature. Thus nature is viewed not only as a passive object, but is also as a dynamic force that plays a pivotal role in shaping an ecological consciousness of the poet as well as the general reader.

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