



Exploring Postcolonial Elements in Mamang Dai's Works: A Select Study

Dr Minakshi Talukdar

Assistant Professor,

Captain Williamson Memorial Govt. College,

Baghmara, South Garo Hills', Meghalaya.

minakshitalukdartura@gmail.com

<https://doi.org/10.66376/criterion.v17.n4.66>

Abstract:

Mamang Dai is a woman poet, novelist and journalist from Arunachal Pradesh, North-East India. Postcolonial themes form an integral part of her literary works. This paper examines postcolonial elements in Mamang Dai's selected works- "Birthplace," "Once Upon A Time in Pasighat," "The Voice of the Mountain," "I'm Going Back To Old," *The Black Hill* and *The Legends of Pensam*. Using Edward Said's concept of "Orientalism" the study analyses how these texts represent history, ethnicity, culture and identity. It explores Dai's deep engagement with postcolonial resistance. It also investigates the rich indigenous heritage of Arunachal Pradesh alongside the ruptures caused by Christian missionaries.

Keywords: Post colonialism, Edward Said. Subversion, History, Ethnicity, Culture, Identity.

Introduction:

Mamang Dai is a versatile woman writer from North-East India. She explores themes of identity, power and resistance in her work. By investigating the issues of history, ethnicity, culture, and identity, the former civil servant from Arunachal Pradesh infuses her creative expressions with postcolonial elements. Dai writes in English to challenge the colonial language. She uses it to retell and preserve the traditional Adi folk tales. Robert J. C. Young, in his book *Postcolonialism: An Historical Introduction*, says: “The postcolonial is a dialectical concept that marks the broad historical facts of decolonization and the determined achievement of sovereignty-but also the realities of nations and peoples emerging into a new imperialistic context of economic and sometimes political domination” (57).

Objectives of the study

The postcolonial study of “Birthplace”, “Once Upon A Time in Pasighat,” “The Voice of the Mountain,” “I’m Going Back To Old, *The Black Hill* and *The Legends of Pensam* will look at the quest for cultural autonomy, identity and belonging, resistance and the voice of marginal identity.

Methodology

This paper provides a critical reading of Mamang Dai’s literary works through the postcolonial perspective of ‘orientalism’. It undertakes a descriptive analysis to explore how the selected works describe history, ethnicity, culture and identity and investigates why Dai retrieves ethnicity and culture and rewrites history in her works.

Discussion

Mamang Dai's literature serves as a powerful counter-narrative to Eurocentric discourse vividly capturing the lived experiences of indigenous communities in North-East India. By centering local histories, oral traditions and cultural resilience, her work effectively deconstructs and dismantles 'Orientalism'. According to Edward Said, Orientalism refers to the West's study and representation of the East. It also encompasses cultural and political domination of the Orient by the West. Edward Said put forward several definitions of Orientalism in the introduction to his book *Orientalism*. One of these is that Orientalism is "a Western style for dominating, restructuring and having authority over the Orient" (20).

The quest for ethnic and cultural autonomy reverberates in Mamang Dai's works. She resists the dominant narrative that perpetuates harmful stereotypes. She is concerned with colonisers' misrepresentation of the Adi tribe in Eurocentric narratives. In the Preface of her book *Arunachal Pradesh: The Hidden Land*, she writes: "...the history of our people, our origins and routes of migration remain a matter of speculation, based purely on the few recorded documents left by early explorers..." (6).

John Butler is one of the early explorers to record the history of North Eastern people. His description of the Abors (the Adi Tribe) in the book entitled *A Sketch of Assam: with Some Account of the Hill Tribes* is a clear example of how the occidental literary and cultural canon has misrepresented the orient. He identifies the Abors as rude and barbarous people: "They appear to be descendants of the Tartar race; and are large, uncouth, athletic, fierce-looking, dirty fellows... They can neither read nor write, and their language sounds extremely harsh... Of delicacy, however, the Abors are as void as they are of cleanliness" (111-112).

The coloniser constructs and represents the Adi tribe as the "other" in the strict binary opposition. Butler views the Adi tribe by their culturally determined, biased and limited

perspective. Thus, Power forms knowledge and this knowledge in turn becomes a tool for exercising power through institutions and cultural domination.

Mamang Dai writes back to such encroachments. In the poem “Birthplace,” she celebrates her ethnic origin, childhood, cultural growth, and identity, and she also proudly declares that they are the offspring of nature, faith and devotion:

We are the children of the rain

Of the cloud woman,

Brother to the stone and bat

In our cradle of bamboo and vine.

The Adi tribe of Arunachal Pradesh feels a strong bond with nature. This is why they are the champions of the environment. Their Arunachal Pradesh, ‘The Land of the Dawn Lit Mountains,’ is one of the greenest parts of the world. The concluding paragraph of the poem “Birthplace,” represents the indigenous lifestyle of the Adi tribe and their deep tradition and consciousness:

The first drop of water

gave birth to man.

From red sheath

To green stem

And the spreading wind:

We descend

From solitude and miracles (Dai).

The preceding lines of the poem appear to be a response to Butler's labelling of the Adi tribe. Dai also vividly represents the prosperity of their culture through their experience of sleeping together in "long houses." This reflects tribal way of communal living, rooted in strong emotional bonds, mutual support, and the sharing of cultural values, knowledge, and skills. Their belief in "clan" solidarity mirrors ancient Indian culture. Consequently, Dai challenges conventional knowledge, and established ways of thinking about the lives of the Adi tribe seeking to resist Western coercion and secure greater autonomy. Dai's works resonate with the struggle to define and reclaim one's own culture in the face of colonial influence. The speaker of the poem "Once Upon A Time in Pasighat" connotes the voice of the Adi tribe. Her struggle to navigate the complex terrain of the native and the foreign echoes the Postcolonial experience. The title of the poem evokes memories of the past. Pasighat is not merely the hometown of Dai; it symbolises the town history having been founded by the Adi elders. The poem uses imagery of "Unswept house", "bamboo leaves to scrap the floor", "cobweb in the corner" to represent the simple traditional lifestyle of the Adi tribe. Conversely the lines such as "Never mind whoever comes", "My friends are of a different sort" and "If you see a fly / Do not lift your white hand..." point to the encroachment of modernity, with "white hand" specifically implying western encroachment. In this context, the foreign group maintains power not through direct force, but by shaping the dominant culture of a society.

The speaker in the poem is caught between tradition and modernity, She struggles to protect old ways from new external pressures. These outside influences work automatically, even when the influencer is absent. They succeed because people carry a deep sense of inferiority. In this way, the Adi community of Arunachal Pradesh becomes the agent of its own subjection.

Mamang Dai's literary works embody a powerful subaltern voice that articulates deep-seated marginalisation. Her writing highlights the deep wounds left by colonial history and the ongoing cultural changes in North-East India. An examination of the profound disruption

between indigenous tribal beliefs and imposed colonial Christianity is clearly evident in her oeuvre. *The Legends of Pensam*, short stories by an anonymous narrator, portrays the coloniser as totalitarian:

The men recruited from the hills were given rations and bedding but the work was the work of the devil. Those who went and returned said the forest and the skies were like nothing they had seen before. The migluns were terrifying in their energy and determination. In the lashing rain and the wet earth that buried men up to their waists they drove elephants to cross rivers, remove logs and trample the jungle. The elephants strained and quivered to the shouts of their mahouts, slipped, struggled, knelt, struggled on and many of the poor animals lost their footing and hurtled off the mountainside bellowing like mythical beasts with their eyes rolled up skywards. It was unimaginable, what the migluns were trying to achieve. In the swampy valleys men died like files, shivering with fever and fear (Dai39).

The coloniser sought power. They wanted total control over the life of North-Eastern tribes to extract natural resources and expand their trade and religion. The colonisers' main weapon to persecute the various tribes and nature of the North-East was not only torture but also religion. In the name of civilising local nature worshipping communities, British coloniser strategically partitioned the region from mainland India. The colonisers' imposed Christianity was used as a lethal weapon to alter the history, ethnicity, identity and culture of the tribes; in reality the tribes became the Friday of Daniel Defoe's Robinson Crusoe. The colonisers' implicit policy of forced conversion fractured communities, creating deep divisions between those who embraced Christianity and those who remained faithful to traditional beliefs. The erosion of traditions, legal overhaul, and community division disrupted the tribal region culturally and emotionally.

The colonial power used division to strengthen and legalise their rule-conquest of North-East Indian territory, resource extraction and subjugation of the various tribes. The collaboration between Christian missionaries and the British colonial administration functioned as a powerful mechanism for controlling indigenous tribal societies. Christian missionary institutions ran schools, hospitals, and poor relief thereby building deep societal authority. By using religious teachings to pacify the local population, the colonial administration secured compliance, while missionaries received vital financial backing and state protection against native resistance. The colonial government and the Christian missionaries worked hand in glove, exchanging support to advance their shared goals of power, funding, and social control. The justification of colonial rule, reinforced by the alliance between the colonial regime and Christian missionaries, facilitated the expansion of political and economic control over the tribal communities of North -East India. This alliance not only legitimised colonial intervention but also contributed to the restructuring of indigenous social, cultural, and, economic practices in accordance with colonial interests.

Thus, brave North-East Indian tribal communities, like the Adi and Mishmis, rebelled against the colonisers' murky legalisation of lawlessness in manifold ways to protect their region and people: *The Black Hill*, a historical novel, depicts conflict, the oppression of the coloniser and the resistance of the colonised:

In 1911, a British political officer set out from the plains of Assam on a mission to explore the course of the river Siang flowing through the territory of the Adis. Noel Williamson was well known in the region, with twenty years of experience in dealing with the tribes in the hill tracts of the country. This time, however, his tour ended in tragedy. An angry Adi struck him down in the village of Komsing. Other men of his tribe joined him and then there was a massacre. No one is quite sure what provoked the attack. Some recorded evidence suggests a communication gap: the tribe feared that

Williamson would bring troops to destroy its villages. Another version says that the white sahib had insulted a man who later followed him to komsing and killed him. There are also accounts that tell of a scandal some years before this attack—a story of seduction and romance between a local woman and another white man following the course of the river. He had made her reckless, and fearless like a hawk, and the tribe had meted out terrible punishment in retaliation. Perhaps it was the memory of this event that was the cause. Everything is conjecture. What is certain is that besides Williamson and his friend, a tea-garden doctor named Dr Gregorson, forty-seven sepoy and coolies were also killed. Only three men survived to tell the tale. News of the massacre sent shockwaves across colonial India and resulted in the punitive expedition of 1912, which became known as the Abor Expeditionary Field Force (Dai 47).

Mamang Dai appears to declare that colonisation is our history not our identity. Through her creative corpus, Mamang Dai serves as a vital literary voice for the marginalised Adi community to which she belongs. Drawing upon oral traditions, she preserves the history, culture, and identity of her tribe. John Butler's patronising Eurocentric representation of the Eastern world to justify colonialism is repeated in his book. His writing stereotyped Eastern women as backward and irrational: "The hair of the women is cut short...and the necks of the Abor women are loaded...the legs are exposed from the knee downwards the calf of the leg being bandaged with cane rings to the ankle" (111).

Butler's gaze exoticises and reduces Adi women to their physical body and attire. He deliberately ignores Adi women's subjective inner life, spirit, intellect and agency to establish the "orient", "subaltern" as inferior and the "oxident" as superior.

Dai deconstructs this historical erasure of Adi women's spirit, emotional depth, and internal world. In *The Legends of Pensam*, the section entitled 'Daughters of the Village women' are seen as go-getters, resilient, focused and achievers :

They have been in the forest all morning, cutting wood, cracking dry bamboo and piling stray branches seasoned by sun and rain into stacks to be carried back to the village. This is a daily necessity. The work is hard, but scouring the forest the women could at least stop, stretch, talk to each other. Now the unforgiving hill permits no speech. Every muscle, every trembling cell of the body is concentrated on the effort to tackle the gradient. One step after another they move, silent, with no other thought than to reach the top where they will tear the heavy baskets off their backs for a while and wait, bent and panting, for their bursting hearts, to quieten, slowly, slowly before tackling the last incline to the village gate (Dai73).

The lives of Adi women in Arunachal Pradesh reflect a profound psychological landscape, shaped by emotional depth, intuitive wisdom, and quiet self-reflection. The female character of Gimur from the novel *The Black Hill* and Nenem from *The Legends of Pensam* by Mamang Dai are courageous women who approach life with steadfast devotion and a deep-seated sense of acceptance. Emotional and mental frameworks of both women are noteworthy. Their journey is a rich tapestry of memories, private thoughts and deep introspection that transcends external social roles. Through her female characters, Mamang Dai demonstrates how colonial literature's portrayal of hypersexualised women and its exaggeration of Adi cultural practices were deliberate strategies used to justify the British Empire's civilising mission.

Her poem "I'm Going Back To Old," suggests a return to pre-colonial oral history while expressing a love for tribal identity, a profound connection with nature, and the tradition of storytelling, myths and rituals:

I'm going back to old
To the springtime of water,
And mesmerizing stories
Sky, Mirror, Black earth.
Time. A songbird
Those love songs were long
I'm going back to old .

Mamang Dai uncovers an obscure past through the collective memory. The poem "I'm Going Back To Old," celebrates a deeply rooted heritage that has nurtured its people for centuries. This insightful connection to the past serves as both a sanctuary and a timeless source of strength for the speaker. In her interview with Jaydeep Sarangi entitled "In Conversation with Mamang Dai", Mamang Dai explains that oral tradition is a vital way of life that has shaped her identity and deeply influencing her writing through myth, memories, and imagination:

Certainly I am influenced by the oral narratives. Knowing the stories gives me a sense of identity. It inspires my writing- after all it is a world of myth, memory, and imagination. Oral narratives are generally perceived as a simple recounting of tales for a young audience but I think their significance lies in the symbols embedded in the stories about the sanctity of life, about what makes us human. My response to myth/stories is akin to a quest. It is a world view I am still exploring (2).

The oral tradition of Adi tribe plays a significant role in shaping Mamang Dai as a writer and as a human being. She believes that the oral tradition of her community possesses depth, and it

is a profound field of study for her. In another conversation titled “Interview: Critical Dialogue with Mamang Dai” by Jyotirmoy Prodhani and Urvashi Kuhad, she regards oral tradition as a rich legacy stating that it brings unity among clans and forms the root of their culture:

I think the oral tradition because its so open to interpretation, even in one village we have various sub-clans so they will be narrating it in a slightly different way. But the thread of the story, what I was saying this big tree, we all know the stories, so that kind of gives us our sense of community and thereby our sense of identity in one form or the other and that binds us together. Oh, you know this story of how the goat got its horns? So, this is the folk culture that was transmitted orally (4).

Mamang Dai longs to tie to the past folklore and preserve her culture and nature. The Adi community’s oral tradition finds its fullest expression in her poetry and prose . “The Voice of the Mountain” reflects the beliefs and commitment of Arunachal Pradesh. Ancient communities in North-East India are Nature worshippers. Mountains, forests rivers, and wildlife intimately shape the daily life and culture of the Adi community. Nature’s mystery always intoxicates them with divine love. Dai transforms her love for hills, mountains, gorges, rivers ,flora and fauna into stunning literary panoramas. To the Adi community, Nature is a living spirit and a protective guardian. It stands as a powerful testament to their rich history, cultural heritage and identity. Thus, Dai personifies the Nature in “The Voice of the Mountain”:

From where I sit on the high platform

I can see the ferry lights crossing criss-crossing the big river.

I know the towns, the estuary mouth.

There, beyond the last bank

where the colour drains from heaven

I can outline the chapters of the world.

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 leaning by the tree and try to make a sign (45).

Dai explains a much deeper feeling for nature than we can comprehend, looking past basic religious rituals or beliefs to uncover a penetrating spiritual bond. The mountain is seen as the supreme intelligence that governs everything existing in the universe. Nature does not move in chaos, it moves through order. As the sustaining order of the universe, nature supports everything that exists and drives the continuous evolution of all living beings. Any imbalance in this order will make life disappear. Dai aspires to say to the coloniser that humans must live life truthfully and responsibly, just as Nature performs its duties, its righteousness by providing oxygen, water, sunlight etc.:

I am an old man sipping the breeze

that is forever young.

In my life I have lived many lives.

My voice is sea waves and mountain peaks,

in the transfer of symbols

I am the chance syllable that orders the world

instructed with history and miracles.

I am the desert and the rain .

The wild bird that sits in the west.

The past that recreates itself

and particles of life that clutch and cling

for thousands of years –

I know, I know these things

as rocks know, burning in the sun's embrace, about clouds and sudden rain;

as I know a cloud is a cloud is a cloud,

a cloud in 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:

From the east the warriors returns

With the blood of peonies.

I am the child who died at the edge of the world, the distance between end and hope.

The star diagram that fell from the sky,

the summer that makes men weep.

I'm the women 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;

there, where the narrow gorge hastens the wind

I am the place where memory escapes

the myth of time,

I am the sleep in the mind of the mountain

("TheVoice of the Mountain" 45- 46).

The poem "The Desire of Ink" also describes the poet's desire of expression through words.

The transition from oral to written history for a marginalised group is a political act. It alters shared memories into recognised historical text to fight for equality.

Conclusion

In a nutshell, Mamang Dai successfully represents the Adi tribe's history through her works. She dismantles the oppression of the tribe's knowledge system, narratives and culture. Her attempt to decolonise North-East India through her writing is remarkable.

Works Cited:

Butler, John. A Sketch of Assam: With Some Account of the Hill Tribes. Elder and Co., 1847.

Dai, Mamang. "ARUNACHAL." India International Centre Quarterly, vol. 32, no. 2/3, 2005, pp. 45–48. JSTOR, <http://www.jstor.org/stable/23006007>. Accessed 21 Aug. 2026.

---. Arunachal Pradesh: The Hidden Land. Penguin Books India, 2009.

---. "Birthplace." Kavitayan: Indian Poetry, Kavitayan, vol. 2, oocities.org/kavitayan/mamang.html.

---. The Black Hill. Aleph Book Company, 2014.

---. The Legends of Pensam. Penguin Books India, 2006.

---. "Mamang Dai: New and Old Poems." The Punch Magazine, 31 Jan. 2021, www.thepunchmagazine.com/the-byword/poetry/mamang-dai-new-and-old-poems.

---. "Poems by Mamang Dai." Ethos Literary Journal, May 2023, <https://www.ethosliterary.org/poetry-india/may-2023-issue/poems-by-mamang-dai>.

Prodhani, Jyotirmoy, and Urvashi Kuhad. "Critical Dialogue with Mamang Dai." Rupkatha Journal on Interdisciplinary Studies in Humanities, vol. 14, no. 2, 2022, pp. 1–8. DOI.org, <https://doi.org/10.21659/rupkatha.v14n2.ne44>.

Said, Edward W. *Orientalism*. Western Printing Services, 1978.

Sarangi, Jaydeep. "In Conversation with Mamang Dai." *Writers in Conversation*, vol. 4, no. 2, 2017, <https://journals.flinders.edu.au/index.php/wic/article/view/23>.

Young, Robert J. C. *Postcolonialism: A Historical Introduction*. Blackwell Publishers, 2001.