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Memory, Myth and the Mountain: Revisiting Mamang Dai's 'The Voice of the Mountain'

Anushka Saha and Stuti Chatterjee

Abstract: Memory in Mamang Dai's poetry facilitates engagement with history, identity, and landscape—particularly within the cultural and ecological context of Arunachal Pradesh. This paper primarily seeks to delve into the role of memory in Mamang Dai's 'The Voice of the Mountain,' exploring how it functions as a site of both personal and collective memory within a postcolonial framework. The mountain in Dai's poem becomes a living repository of wisdom, a symbolic witness to the cultural memory of her community that resists the mainstream archival narratives. Through this act of remembering, the poem actively disrupts and reconfigures the cultural memory of a marginalised group, offering a space where alternative histories can emerge.

At its core, Dai's poetry utilizes the mountain as a potent symbol of resilience, "crossing criss crossing" the colonial narratives that have homogenised, otherised and often appropriated the Northeast India. Through her engagement with the natural world, Dai not only resists colonial domination but also asserts the sanctity of ecological relationships, bringing in the 'Donyi- Polo' worldview while offering an ecofeminist perspective.

The embodied memory within the poem—through the 'voice' of the mountain, merging with the voice of the poet itself, the river, and the natural world—offers a counter-memory. She advocates for an ethnic attachment to ecology, myths and oral narratives of the past. Dai uses English, a language historically tied to colonial domination, to re-order and disseminate the cultural memory of her home, Arunachal Pradesh, thereby aiding in the memory-making process to safeguard the 'Adi' community from deliberate historical amnesia. The

paper investigates how memory, in this context, becomes a material force—shaped by the physical world and cultural practices, particularly oral traditions, culminating in the act of storytelling or 'Aabang' through literature from the Northeast. The discussion underscores how this subversive narrative technique plays a significant role in preserving and perpetuating a sense of belonging and redefining identity across generations.

Keywords: *Memory, Postcolonial ecofeminism, Marginalisation, Oral traditions.*

> O sweet companions, loved with love intense,
> For your sakes, shall the tree be ever dear.
> Blent with your images, it shall arise
> In memory, till the hot tears blind mine eyes!
>
> 'Our Casuarina Tree', Toru Dutt

> Remember, because nothing is ended but it is changed.
> And memory is a changing shape showing with these fading possessions
> in lands beyond the great ocean that all is changed but not ended.
> And in the villages the silent hill men still await
> the long promised letters, and the meaning of words
>
> 'Missing Link', Mamang Dai

Introduction

In the midst of the lush landscape of Arunachal Pradesh, Mamang Dai's 'The Voice of the Mountain' attempts to navigate the interplay between an individual recollection and a collective historical consciousness. Her personal memories are deeply informed by and further inform the collective memory of her 'Adi' culture, and the land itself holds the key to understanding both the past and the present. The

poet channels the ‘voice’ of the mountain, the ‘operative metaphor’ and forges a ‘collective’ and ‘cultural’ memory.

> The concept of ‘remembering’ (a cognitive process which takes place in individual brains) is metaphorically transferred to the level of culture. In this metaphorical sense, scholars speak of a ‘nation’s memory,’ a ‘religious community’s memory,’ or even of ‘literature’s memory.’ (Erll 4)

Dai “is not a solitary intellectual rising above her organic community, but the sole link between the organic community and the fast-modernising world” (Bhattacharya 3). Her choice of “leav[ing] the spear” symbolizes a constant negotiation with modernity —not as a rejection of tradition, but as an effort to articulate their identity within contemporary contexts, despite the risk of being misinterpreted or stereotyped by dominant mainland narratives. Though their language is changing, communication is still possible. As Kynpham Sing Nongkyrnrih states,

> There is in the North-east an uneasy coexistence of paradoxical worlds such as the folk and the westernised, virgin forests and car choked streets, ethnic cleansers and the parasites of democracy, ancestral values and flagrant corruption, resurgent nativism and the sensitive outsider's predicament... As chroniclers of their subjective realities, the poets of the region do reflect in their poetry this ‘world of eerie contradictions’ even as they explore their own mindscapes and the many-layered complexities of human relationships.

Therefore, poets from Northeast India perform as a 'chronicler' of 'subjective realities', reconstructing myth and legends, asserting their indigenous identity,

acknowledging the traditional values and forging an inherent unity among the diverse tribes in the rapid era of transition torn by violence and insecurity. Myth and folklore prominent in the works of Northeast India are not used for mere Romantic escapism but rather form an alternative reality.

The Centre-Margin Binary and Postcolonial Deconstruction

It is often said that land and territory are the cornerstones of the lives of tribal people, yet historically, the foundation of their existence has been denied, stripped off, and displaced. The British looked for dominant groups or supreme powers that could maintain stability within their domains. In order to dominate the periphery, the British fortified the centres of authority. The "extent as well as the permanence and strength of a country" are determined by the power of "central control" (Holdich 31). The hills were to revolve around the plains. Alternatively, the hills were to be fenced off as the region outside the "theatre of capital" (Baruah 17).

The term 'North-east' connotes a distance from the mainland; the whole idea of the centre-periphery in Mamang Dai's poem is the Indian mainland and the Northeast hinterland, respectively. This further brings in the politics of exclusion that consolidates the centre-margin binary. However, the term also homogenises the eight separate states as one lump or bolus, the Northeast. Arunachal Pradesh is portrayed by Dai as a vast land, "of austere grandeur and loveliness, covering 83,743 sq. km that straddle the eastern Himalaya like an intervening belt of green shadowed in perpetual rain and mist" (Dai, *The Inheritance of Words* 13). It is inhabited by such a conglomeration of peoples, a melange of cultures, languages, and religions, that they have always been victims of the centre's marginalising and homogenising tendencies.

'The Voice of the Mountain' opens up an alternate poetic space to protect an ethnic past against the homogenising attempts of the mainstream. Dai attempts to write from the margins to represent her culture, hoping to inculcate it into the country's multicultural setting. This makes her poem an act of reclamation. Mizo

poet Cherrie L. Chhangte communicates this exclusion and homogenization effectively in the poem, 'What does an Indian Look Like?':

> Are we as proud of our unity
> As we are of our diversity?....
> ……..
> I am a curiosity, an ethnic specimen.
> Politics, history, anthropology, 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.

She goes on to mention how the north-eastern community has been "sidelined, side-tracked, sidestepped" by mainstream history and left only as "a minority in a majority world."

Edward Said "claims that every nation has its own internal 'other', which stands doubly marginalised by global imperialism that colonises a nation and the internal colonisation faced by them against the mainstream/canonical social traditions" (Sachan 94). It is a microcosmic version, perhaps a rereading of Said's theory of 'Orientalism,' where the West [here, India] considers the Orient [here, the North-East] as a place of mystery and exoticism. Like the 'white man's burden', mainland India, the all-powerful centre, believing modernisation of the margins to be an inevitable rescue project, introduces English education, rapid urbanization, and industrialization. This project is essentially an obliteration of their identity, imposing upon them a new identity which resembles the majoritarian notion of what it means to be an 'Indian.' In Spivak's words, "the remotely orchestrated, far-flung, and heterogeneous project to constitute the colonial subject as Other," ends up denying and negating the "other" for establishing the supremacy of the "self" (Spivak 284).

History as a Tool of Control: Forging a Counter-memory

Dai speaks of the rapid changes in the geo-political space of the Northeast in her book *Arunachal Pradesh, the Hidden Land*:

> Once known as the North East Frontier Agency (NEFA), Arunachal Pradesh became the twenty-fourth state of the country in 1987. In the early years of its history the pace of change in the state was slow, somewhat cautious. The land was our birthplace. We worked the land and where we were was our home. Today change has come like a steam roller. (78)

The repetition of 'crossing' and 'criss-crossing' in the first stanza, can metaphorically (like cross-hatchings) point towards not only journeys and returns, but also invasions, trespasses, insurgency, counterinsurgency, army attacks and violations witnessed by the author, her community, and the landscape. It is a land brutally fractured and mutilated by the constant intrusion, intervention and domination by the nation-state. She represents the trauma of a society in transition, especially under the shadow of state-sanctioned violence (AFSPA)[1], draconian military laws, and communal violence between tribes. ('The Voice of the Mountain')

The land of the North-east has been brutally fractured and mutilated by the Nation-State by application of the AFSPA (Armed Forces Special Protection Act) in the Seven Sister States [now, eight]. The state-sponsored violence that North-East has been repeatedly subjected to, can be interlinked with the violence and mutilation of the natural world by modernisation, and further to the rape of a

[1] Enacted in 1958, the Armed Forces Special Powers Act (AFSPA) has significantly influenced the socio-political landscape of Northeast India by institutionalizing a prolonged state of exception and militarization. Introduced as a response to insurgent movements, the Act confers extensive powers on the armed forces, including the authority to arrest without warrant, conduct searches without consent, and employ lethal force in areas designated as 'disturbed'. Over time, AFSPA has contributed to an environment marked by surveillance, control, and contested state-citizen relations across the region.

woman, and killing of children. K.B. Veio Pou, in his article, "Of people and their stories: writings in English from India's Northeast", goes on to state,

> One of the distinctive styles of the poets from the Northeast is their use of satire and irony. While there is also the direct and blunt attack on the misunderstanding and misrepresentation of the region by various elements, there is also the subtle attack on the corruption and violence that stalk the land in various forms. (Pou 233)

In a similar vein, Monalisa Changkija, a poet from Nagaland, mourns the destruction of nature and its rich resources, sacrificed in the name of development and progress, through her evocative poetry:

> Yes, I've seen our rice fields
> turn into factories and mills
> our green hills
> reduced to barren brown
> our rivers have dried
> and our once sparkling fish
> lie dead on sandy banks.
> It's no more the Pines I can smell
> nor hear the Tragopan and the Hornbill.
>
> ('Of a People Unanswered')

'The Voice of the Mountain' hints at the violence of the past, flowing over to posterity and broaches the subject of "epistemic violence"[2] that the North-eastern sister states have forever been subjected to. Harpreet Vohra goes on to comment,

[2] Spivak's concept of 'epistemic violence' highlights how the mainstream power discourses try to erase and overwrite indigenous knowledge systems. The powerful centre modernises and urbanises the margins under the pretext of *saving* them. In the process of doing so, it negates the 'other' while establishing the supremacy of the 'centre'. Dai, in invoking the land as a being of ancient knowledge

> Regimes may change and the dream of a true homeland may be fulfilled, but peace ever eludes. The existence of truth is an existential reality, but behind it is the turmoil and dissatisfaction of a nation. Several movements for peace over the ages have achieved peace on the ashes of violence and bloody wars. History is a mere spectator to these violent revolutions and the innocence of peace has often been cloaked in the guilt of blood. (Vohra 48)

The mountain's voice represents the collective voice of the 'subaltern' people, who as Gayatri Spivak says, "cannot speak," or rather, have been rendered speechless. They have historically been denied a platform to express their grievances and aspirations. It brings out the recurring nature of this violence as a silent witness. Being a repository of ancient wisdom and evidently, "the chapters of the world" ('The Voice of the Mountain'), the mountain knows that life is ephemeral, and permanence is a far-fetched dream. It is a permanent presence and knows how everything around it is subject to change or mutability:

> In the end, the universe yields nothing except a dream
> of permanence.
> Peace is a falsity.
> A moment of rest comes after long combat.
>
> ('The Voice of the Mountain')

The self-awareness that 'Peace is a falsity,' is attuned to the postcolonial condition, in which the memory of colonial violence mars the present and future generations. The history of the mountain is stained with blood with the very line, "From the east the warrior returns/ with the blood of peonies," ('The Voice of the Mountain'),

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and wisdom in her poem, re-voices the indigenous knowledge silenced by the mainstream discourses.

invoking the imagery of bloodshed and resilience, underscoring the continued battle for survival and honour.

Dai mentions that they live in ‘territories forever ancient and new’ while speaking of the consequences of these repeated incursions, the highlight of which is the desertion of the ‘spear’, a symbol of defence for the warrior community, in favour of communicating with the visitor. This moving towards a new, yet universally recognised, sign-system is essential to write and tell the story of her community silenced by totalizing narratives. The poet is the only connection between the rapidly modernizing world and her native society, so "leav[ing] the spear" is a conscious choice borne out of the risk of being stereotyped by the mainland people, not a rejection of tradition.

The hills of the Northeast have often been looked at through colonialist ethnography as inscrutable and as an abode of hostile and savage tribes. Dai's verses challenge this reductive and prejudiced perspective, offering a nuanced and reverent portrayal of the region's natural grandeur. Through her poetic voice, Dai reclaims the narrative, subverting the colonialist gaze that sought to do otherwise and subjugate the landscape and people of the Northeast. In the present poem, as well as in ‘Small Towns and the River’, Dai juxtaposes dusty towns with rivers and the tribal communities they foster. Towns have a special space in Dai’s topography in general, and are usually in conflict with the panoramic space, ‘the land of river and fishes.’ The ‘big river’ separates the poet from the other banks, just like the northeast is connected with, and yet separated from, mainland India. The poem explores the indigenous culture and traditions of that region. In the face of modernisation and outside influences, it emphasises how crucial it is to maintain one's unique cultural identity.

Dai, in saying, “I am the place where memory escapes the myth of time,” creates, what Foucault calls, a “counter-memory” (23) of her silenced community, of her state against India’s official ‘imperialist’ memory. Bhavika Sachan goes on to state how Foucault’s ‘counter-memory’ “runs as a mechanism (in a sense) to check and challenge the official accounts and/or available written records of

governments, mainstream mass media and dominants in society to maintain the integrity of a nation in order to create a pluralistic space where groups, races, communities may freely make competing claims on 'their' idea of what the past is." (Sachan 90) In other words, counter-memory is an individual act of resistance to relentlessly challenge mainstream history as the absolute knowledge. Tilottama Misra, in "Speaking, Writing and Coming of the Print Culture in Northeast India", talks about the fusion of the written and the oral in the Northeast and how important it is to write orality as a means of maintaining their unique culture (Kakoti 17). Northeast, therefore, forms a society "that does not write and that has no recourse for transmitting cultural traditions" through written means. In such societies, each member is responsible for sustaining Orality, which she describes as "the restitution of memory transmitted through diverse expressions of voice or words of a culture" (Devantine 10).

The Northeastern region of India is home to diverse communities—tribes, castes, and groups— each with "a rich culture of its own rooted in their unique customs and traditions." Writers from the region reflect this diversity by shaping English to suit their cultural contexts. The new generation of writers has embraced English, not as a colonial imposition, but as a means to give "permanence to the fluid narrations of oral literature." For writers like Mamang Dai, this shift to English was "a radical step," allowing oral traditions to enter the global literary stage (Kakoti 22).

In an interview with Jobeth Ann Warjri, Prof. Esther Syiem explains that her creative work is deeply rooted in oral storytelling, shaped by memories of stories told by "grandmother, my mother, my father and the innumerable visitors who were never part and parcel of the city of Shillong, but who came from the suburbs, who belonged to far away villages." While she was growing up, she was "burdened with the thought that there were no books in Khasi-on-Khasi subjects that 'mattered'" and therefore her first poetry collection aimed to reconnect with the past and reveal its contemporary relevance,

> I suppose my first collection of poems was an attempt to bridge the past; I found that these memories were, to my surprise, meaningful and that they had a significantly contemporary relevance. It was my first attempt and I was still feeling my way around but realising more and more that so much had to be retold, reinvented, re-made, updated and understood. I was not looking to write about the daffodil, as I told Professor Temsula Ao in one of my innumerable conversations with her. I was looking to the bamboo and the scuttling rodents who were generating stories of other worlds and other modes of being.

Similarly, Dai portrays how literature and memory can create alternative histories and narratives that resist and contest the state-sanctioned dominant narratives that seek to suppress the voices from the margins. In her creation of this counter-memory, she advocates her ethnic attachment to ecology, myths, and oral narratives. She legitimises, preserves, and shapes the original narratives of her community that have been often misheard, misjudged, and misrepresented.

Leaving the Spear Leaning by the Tree…

Dai "speak[s] in changing languages"— to resist against, accommodate and communicate with the centre. She leaves her "spear leaning by the tree" and tries "to make a sign", signifying a departure from aggression or defensiveness, opting instead for peaceful gestures. She uses a poetic language, replete with symbolism, folklore and local metaphors, rooted in their indigenous oral traditions and storytelling practices.[3]

The narrator calls the land 'pensam,' an "in-between region", symbolizing a space between logic and belief, and the material and the mystical. The tribe's

[3] This mirrors the cultural specificity of her poem and becomes an act of reclaiming their culture, further challenging the dominance of colonial narratives and languages.

history unfolds through a web of interconnected stories, central to their identity and community bonding. As Dai affirms in her poem 'An Obscure Place,' "The history of our race begins with the place of stories" (Kakoti 88). Kakoti goes on to state,

> Pensam is also about in-betweenness while in a state of transition. While roads are constructed in Arunachal Pradesh and remote villages are connected with the outside world, "the brave and patient few guard the good old ways negotiating change with memory and remembrance." In the tussle between tradition and modernity, there are some who cling to tradition and the old way of life. People gather around the fire during the evening and recall stories from the past to be narrated to the future generation so that one's touch with one's roots is maintained. (Kakoti 145)

Ngũgĩ wa Thiong'o, in *Decolonising the Mind*, emphasises the significance of decolonising oneself both in terms of culture and language; to resist imperialist powers and restore the primacy of one's indigenous language (Ngũgĩ 16). Dai finds herself stuck in what Homi Bhabha calls the 'third space', between being at once the state-colonised subject and the postcolonial poet, boldly using the coloniser's tongue and appropriating it. In the persona of the mountain, she finds herself in between the old and young, savage and civilised, silence and speech, and, the centre and the margin—like Derek Walcott in 'A Far Cry from Africa' feels "divided to the vein". It portrays the anxiety of bearing witness to a forever changing world of cleft identities.

Drawing on the ideas of the Kenyan writer, Dr. Usham Rojio says that the cultural practices of the North East can be understood as 'orature' which could be roughly defined as the oral equivalent of literature, including not just "'external manifestations' like performing arts", but also the "core values" of a culture (Rojjo 2). Dr. Rojio believes that the unique culture of the North East developed alongside

the region's unique landscape. However, urbanization and modernization have changed the region's landscape and have also led to the decline of orature, "causing a loss in the meanings specifically associated with it."

Nature as Affective Assemblages Forming an Eco-mystical Worldview

In 'The Voice of the Mountain, ' the mystic grandeur and majesty of the mountain, intertwined with myths and folklore, convey a narrative about the people and their deep concern for preserving the spirit of nature. Dai points out the poetic consciousness in "On Creation Myths and Oral Narratives" as being deeply embedded in the collective mythical memories of their community, making it inevitably conjoined with the cultural heritage and shared history:

> 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 [....] By then we realise the need to identify ourselves again as belonging to a particular place, a community; and some signs for this lie with our stories. We are here today as members of a particular community with a particular set of beliefs, by an act of faith, because we reposed belief in the 'word as composed in our myths and legends. In the world of our ancestors this was the art of the storyteller, the medicine man, the orator, the priest. Everyone knows the stories, in one form or another; and it is this knowledge that links the individual to a group. (Dai 3)

In the poem, the mountain seems to be an omniscient being living in "territories forever ancient and new". The assertive and elemental 'voice' of the mountain is revealed in the following lines:

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.

('The Voice of the Mountain')

"The mountains also know the clouds intimately and have a clear link with the impending." The tribal people hold a belief system influenced by an 'eco-mystical concept' of the symbiotic relationship between mountains and the rain; this traditional knowledge forges a nature-human interaction (Das and Ali 6728).

Belonging to the Adi community, Dai's invocation of the natural world is not a mere poetic device but a declaration of the *Donyi-Polo* worldview. In an interview with Nilanshu Aggarwal, Dai says,

> The traditional belief of the Adi community to which I belong is full of this union [of 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'. (Aggarwal 1)

At the poem's core, the mountain reflects the perseverance and strength of indigenous people in facing the threat of colonial oppression. The poem depicts the mountain as a repository of wisdom and an emblem of constancy in an ever-changing world. Staged "on the high platform," in Dai's poetic landscape, the mountain becomes a sentinel that has witnessed the ebb and flow of civilizations and documents the alternate history of the homogenised community. *Donyi-Poloism* could be seen as a parallel to the ancient Indian philosophical non-dualism, which views all forms—living and non-living—as one.

While ecocriticism examines the human-nature relationship in literature, 'Deep Ecology' goes further by shifting the focus from 'anthropocentric' thinking to a broader respect for all life forms, 'biocentrism'. Both Deep Ecology and *Donyi-Poloism*, stress the "biocentric assertion that all life forms are to be preserved and that humans are not the central figures to rule the planet earth" (Singha 3).

Nature in Dai's poetry is neither a passive backdrop to human experience, nor a wasteland that hinders the flow of life, but an active, animate presence that bears witness to even the subtle, everyday tensions of life in the region. The land, therefore, has a 'tangible presence' (Singha 4), as Dai observes in 'Banjo Moon':

> The tin roof is a music maker
> drumming hard notes of water.
> All night a pond
> dreams of water lilies
> to decorate its heart.

In Dai's works we find that animistic principles have been reconstructed by her poetic oeuvre and sound ecological consciousness. Natural components are endowed with life and soul, controlling the universe which leads to the Adi eco-theosophy upholding biodiversity. In this context, Nigamananda Das clearly states,

> Like human rights, animism pleads for the ecology rights (ecofeminism) and animal rights. The humans smell the Evil in the huge ferocious ecology and the tribes practice the rituals to propitiate the Evil for peace and prosperity of all concerned. The Evil in the Adi culture as has been portrayed by Mamang may be classified as (i) supernatural, (ii) physical, (ii) ecological, (iv) symbolic, (v) mysterious/magical. (Das 93)

These evils experienced by the Adi tribals have become legends, essentializing the tribal cultural ecology. Mamang Dai goes on to mention in her 'Author's Note' to *The Legends of Pensam:*

> Like the majority of tribes inhabiting the central belt of Arunachal, the Adis practice an animistic faith that is woven around forest ecology and co-existence with the natural world. There are few road links in their territory. Travel to the distant villages still entails cumbersome river crossings, elephant rides, and long foot marches through dense forest or over high mountain passes.

Dai portrays nature as part of the 'self', unlike the conception and construction of nature in the colonial discourse, where India has either been highly romanticised or imagined as the 'other'— the dark, inhabitable, inscrutable and savage space filled with diseases, dirt, and grime. Dai's poetry deviates from these urban-centric literary narratives and manifests a distinct literary tradition of Northeast India through its concerns of oral heritage and eco-mysticism. "The culture of the Adis is shaped and influenced by the bioregion that these people inhabit" (Kakoti 88). The distinction between nature and culture is often blurred, merging almost completely with each other. Nature is not seen as a backdrop but a being— where rivers, mountains, and celestial bodies are conscious entities, influencing the Adi way of life.

Her animistic philosophy, where nature is alive and interconnected, is reflected in 'The Voice of the Mountain.' As she writes, "In my life I have lived many lives", the poetic persona outlines the "very chapters of the world," illustrating how the ever-changing transience of worldly life is etched over the canvas of nature ('The Voice of the Mountain'). Gunjana Dey, in her article "Writing for an Endangered Nature and Culture: An Ecocritical Reading of Mamang Dai's *The Legends of Pensam*", points out,

> Traditional tribal beliefs form the nucleus of the lives of the characters in this book; spirits, shamans and unnatural events influence their lives in more ways than one. This intricate web of stories gradually unfolds into the history of a tribe. This book is an intermingling of myth and history of the tribe of Adis of the Siang valley... (Dey 76)

She writes, it is "a small world where anything can happen and everything can be lived," *(The Legends of Pensam)* where life is poetic, fragile, and magical. This reflects how Adi life does not separate culture from nature, or myth from reality. The stories in the novel are set in a mythicised landscape, filled with premonitions, spirits, and mysterious events. Dai, in 'Oral Narratives and Myth' in *Glimpses of Northeast*, explains that even if myths seem illogical, they stem from "the minds of men" and reveal human faith, memory, and imagination (Kakoti 234). In an interview with Jyotirmoy Prodhani and Urvashi Kuhad, Dai retorts,

> … I have always been interested in the concept of myth, memory, time, myth, memory, meaning… So, coming back after so many years of having been abroad and then rediscovering the land and the people (and also their stories). So, I was always interested in stories and I have my mother tongue… We have something called the Abang, this is the classical Adi literature, I am talking about the Adi tribe, which is the tribe I belong to in the Siang valley in the Pasighat area; so the Abang I found was really fascinating because it has all the aspirations, the spiritual longings, in the life of man and what it means to be a human person.

Mamang Dai, in an interview given to Subash N. Jeyan for the 'Literary Review' section of *The Hindu*, records these tribal lores in an effort to protect them from being lost to the whirlwind of modernization:

> Ours is an oral tradition you know, I was trying to meet people and collect and record these oral narratives. You know, the small histories which were getting lost and when you talk to people even small things can trigger these memories off.

Dai's experiences and beliefs have undoubtedly been influenced by the oral literary tradition of the Adi community, which is centred around and regulated by nature. This tradition is known locally as 'Abang', meaning a story or an act of storytelling for an audience. Being a part of a tribal culture, Mamang Dai has an innate belief that all elements of nature, including rocks, rivers, and the sky, contain life and life energy. Dai asserts in the prose-poem entitled 'The Deification of Nature':

> 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.

The *Abang*, Dai explains, is a complex narrative with multiple layers. Each Abang contains several sub-stories, creating an epic that begins with a prelude—often rooted in darkness, resembling creation myths—before branching out into various directions. The performer, typically a shaman, can choose any of these branches to explore.

The poem's narrative technique brings memory to life through the 'voice' of the mountain, forming a material force that endeavours to shape the literature of the northeast that Dai wants to represent, as influenced by the local oral tradition of Abang. Therefore, literary texts as affective assemblages participate in the

production and transformation of cultural memory. In the context of this poem, the concept of 'assemblage' by Katarzyna Niziołek offers a profound way to understand how memory, culture, and identity are woven into the narrative and how 'assemblage' is not only an artwork, but also a 'medium of memory'. Dai's work, which intertwines stories of nature, spirituality, and indigenous knowledge, myths, oral narratives, aligns with the idea of *assemblage* as a "product of creativity," that draws from various elements—stories, landscapes, emotions, and traditions—to a larger, collective understanding of identity and history.

Niziołek reminisces about Deleuze and Guattari's notion of "social phenomena […] as dynamic and heterogeneous arrangements of material and immaterial elements, natural and artificial, human and non-human" (Niziołek 271). Dai's poem, too, reveals how collective memory is not an isolated, static entity, but a living, evolving process shaped by the interactions between people, places, objects, and stories. This poem, therefore, can be read as a 'minor literature', one that is "not the literature of a minor language but the literature a minority makes in a major language" (Deleuze and Guattari 16). Dai, therefore, creates an alternate poetic space protecting its ethnic past, challenging the identitarian definitions of standards set by the dominant archives and fostering a collective awareness.

In Mamang Dai's created landscape, the mountain and the river are very much alive, and silently have witnessed the "crossing criss-crossing" of people. They had been witnesses to the journeys— the homing, unhoming, and re-homing of people from their ancestral roots to foreign lands in search of livelihood and security. The separation of land and indigenous people has been a historical truth and accounts for the devastation and deprivation of many indigenous peoples. 'The Voice of the Mountain' reiterates:

> I am the chance syllable that orders the world
> Instructed with history and miracles.

The process of collective remembering and forgetting has been implicated in how culture is passed down through generations and in the formation of

individual, group, and national identities. Human geography, which studies the relationship between people and their environments, looks at how collective memory interacts with physical spaces and landscapes. In other words, the way people remember and forget the past is not just about abstract ideas, but it is also connected to the places they live in and the physical environments they inhabit.

> Within this body of work, some scholars of collective memory have addressed the relationship with materiality, exploring how memories are mediated by material cultures, particularly within museums, monuments and buildings. (Fox 22)

A 'woman lost in translation' and a 'box of stories'

Dai's work invites readers to embrace a more holistic, integrated understanding of the relationship between gender, the body, and the natural world, rooted in the rich cultural traditions and lived experiences of indigenous communities. In the Eurocentric worldview, nature is often subordinated to culture, but postcolonial deconstruction offers you to see nature as a part of life— a dynamic, growing entity, a part of its daily routine. Nature is acted upon without care or consent, and it is seen as a conquest for many, including Victor Frankenstein, who sets out to ravish the female nature "with unrelaxed and breathless eagerness," pursuing "nature to her hiding places" (Shelley 36). That nature is "hiding" indicates that it is both passive and nonconsenting. In her poem, 'Lament for an Earth', Temsula Ao literally laments for an earth that was once "verdant, virgin, [and] vibrant":

> Once upon an earth
> There was a forest,
> Verdant, virgin, vibrant
> With tall trees
> In majestic splendour
> Their canopy
> Unpenetrated

Even by the mighty sun,
The stillness humming
With birds' cries.

The loss of the splendour of the forest or the tarnishing of the purity of nature is in similitude with the sexual violation of a woman.

Rabindranath Tagore, in stark contrast, while writing in *Tapovan*, emphasised the sacredness of forests in Indian culture, recognizing the principles of life in nature as the highest form of cultural evolution:

> The culture of the forest has fuelled the culture of Indian society. The culture that has arisen from the forest has been influenced by the diverse processes of renewal of life which are always at play in the forest, varying from species to species, from season to season, in sight and sound and smell. The unifying principle of life in diversity, of democratic pluralism, thus became the principle of Indian civilization. (Shiva 265)

In Mamang Dai, we see a reconfiguration and deconstruction of gender, nature and body, which comes with the denial of a Western value system. According to Adi mythology, the ever-changing and beautiful natural world represents the beauty of Nyangi Myete (*The Sky Queen*), a celestial bride who becomes a symbol of renewal and rebirth after destruction. Her physical beauty becomes the landscape: green vegetation is her skirt, white clouds her robe, rain her tears, birdsong her voice. In the book *Legends of Pensam*, Mamang Dai titles a segment 'The Daughters of the Village,' and it is here that she tries to highlight the connection between women and their land. In the East, nature has often been deified and worshipped. In the poem 'The River', Dai has equated the nature of a woman's soul with the dynamic river: "I thought the river is a woman…"

The third section of *Legends of Pensam* entitled 'Daughters of the Village' renders the image of Adi women engaging themselves in daily chores and at the same time maintaining an intimate bond with nature— almost reminiscing Alice Walker's 'In Search of our Mothers' Gardens,' where her mother is seen planting 'ambitious gardens', watering her flowers and chopping up the grass. A matri-linear heritage within the Black community is important as there is a dual inheritance at play: the beauty and creativity of ancestors' lives, alongside the pain and trauma of surviving marginalised identities. This legacy is passed down through generations of 'mothers and grandmothers', with the trauma almost becoming an unspoken pact, transmitted alongside the strength and resilience to endure:

> …our mothers and grandmothers have, more often than not anonymously, handed on the creative spark, the seed of the flower they themselves never hoped to see: or like a sealed letter they could not plainly read. (Walker 240)

Walker reflects on how her understanding of her mother's life, particularly through the lens of her mother's mannerisms and language, shaped her own identity as a writer, highlighting how storytelling itself becomes an inheritance,

> …so many of the stories that I write, that we all write, are my mother's stories. Only recently did I fully realize this: that through years of listening to my mother's stories of her life, I have absorbed not only the stories themselves, but something of the manner in which she spoke. (Walker 240)

Walker emphasizes how these women, despite the systemic repression they faced, managed to find expression through everyday acts of creativity, like quilting, gardening, and storytelling. Therefore, storytelling and artistic legacy become an act of resisting oppressive forces through communal sisterhood.

Even though the Adi women are tightly engaged in their domestic life, nature as a nurturer soothes their pain and weariness knitted with their surroundings. Walker, in a similar note, recounts how while "working in her flowers", her mother is "radiant, almost to the point of being invisible…Ordering the universe in the image of her personal conception of Beauty" (Walker 241). This is a kind of spiritual continuum where you do not see yourself as separate from the workings of the universe. Belonging to the Adi community, Dai's position as a woman poet becomes significant in her association with nature. As the voice of the woman poet fuses to become one with the mountain, it becomes more than a passive monolith. The mountain stands as an ageless storyteller, with each crag and crevice bearing the tales of those who have survived colonial storms and the profound changes of modernity and in becoming so, the poet becomes "a woman lost in translation."

Rediscovering the Past in the Present

Memory does not exist as just an individual recollection but is anchored in physical spaces and cultural practices. This creates a sense of continuity, and of the past being forever present, as evident in Paul Connerton's *How Societies Remember*,

> …no collective memory can exist without reference to a socially specific spatial framework. That is to say, our images of social spaces, because of their relative stability, give us the illusion of not changing and of rediscovering the past in the present. (Connerton 37)

Along the same lines, Toni Morrison's idea of "rememory" alludes to the trauma and horrors of the past that persist within people, in places and objects, natural or otherwise. She mentions how "places are still there[...] not just in my rememory, but out there, in the world" (Morrison 70)— even if we consciously want to forget and tuck them into the unconscious of the mind, they still very much exist, materialising into some form or the other. Morrison suggests how it is important to re-bring these memories and acknowledge them, in order to come to

terms with, and move on from it. Mamang Dai attempts to approach it through nature, where she delineates memory as something that is not just stored in one's mind but also exists in nature itself. The mountain becomes a mnemonic force, a material memory— a living archive that records the history of the world, surpassing the "myth of time". It continues to be a symbol of permanence in a rapidly changing world, asserting Connerton's notion of "rediscovering the past in the present" (Connerton 37).

The act of rediscovering or remembering involves passing down to posterity, 'a box of stories'— such that one "can shape them, colour them, and pull them out anytime" to revisit (Dai, *The Legends of Pensam* 116). It is not just about preserving the past—it's about asserting a continued presence and re-shaping the future.

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