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Narrating the Silences: Oral Tradition, Historical Trauma, and the Subversion of Colonial Discourse in Mamang Dai's Historical Fiction

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Abstract

The themes of cultural identity and historical trauma against the indigenous communities of Arunachal Pradesh are explored in the historical fiction of Mamang Dai especially in *The Black Hill*. This research paper examines how Mamang Dai's historical fiction draws upon oral traditions to challenge and destabilize the dominant narratives of colonial discourse.. Rarely recorded by official archives, Dai bases his stories on the collective memory, myths and legends of the Adi and Mishmi tribes giving them small histories. Using imagination and oral histories, Dai explains the experiences and perspectives of the marginalized people in the colonial histories and lends a voice to the voiceless. As an example, in *The Black Hill*, Dai recreates the tale of the Mishmi chief Kajinsha and the French priest Father Krick using the fictional character Gimur to express the mysteries of silence left by history and announce the innocence of the tribal chief. The central idea of this method of narrative is to undermine the belief in historical truth and make the fiction by Dai a vital exercise of cultural recovery and opposition to totalizing national histories of colonialism. In this manner, it makes the text a crucial tool for asserting indigenous epistemic agency and cultural sovereignty.

Keywords: Oral Tradition, Historical Trauma, Colonial Discourse, Subversion, Resistance, Mamang Dai, Adi Tribe, The Black Hill, Northeast India, Cultural Identity.

Introduction

The potent literary voice that has emerged in the Northeast part of India is Mamang Dai who was born in 1957 in Pasighat, Arunachal Pradesh. She is a member of the tribe, Adi, a group of people who are occasionally addressed by the exonym, Aborigroup, which has been effectively discredited by the Adi people. The life of Dai has been marked by

divergent careers in terms of working as a critical thinker and representative of her region. The writing of Dai is inseparably connected with the socio-cultural environment of Arunachal Pradesh the region that was once referred to as the North East Frontier Agency (NEFA). It communities 26 large tribes and more than 110 sub-clans that make it geographically strategic, thus diversity in terms of ethnicity and language is enormous. Arunachal Pradesh has a long history of political unrest, insurgency, and colonization by the British, which, combined with the latter, remains in the form of severe cultural trauma and a widespread fear of the future. According to Dai, the literature of the region is connected to the conflicts, endurance, and the impetus on the development, yet, in every aspect, it still revolves around the idea of hope.

One of the foremost elements of the literary oeuvre is the fact that Dai is deep into the oral culture of her Adi people. The Adi people have an animistic religion, which is deeply interwoven with the ecology of forests and their co-existence with nature. Traditionally, being a preliterate society, the community had passed its knowledge orally through expert leaders such as the Miri. These oral tales are a crucial and important source of historical awareness and cultural heritage. Dai insists that she deliberately strives to capture and document these vanishing narratives, the little histories that were being lost, so that she can preserve their native wisdom against the homogenizing forces of modernization and globalization. Her writing, sometimes called writing orality, reenacts these temporary narratives into permanent written literature, which serves in direct opposition to the historical colonial prejudice that favored written material over native oral epistemologies.

This commitment to renewing Indigenous ways of knowing is most evident in Dai's historical fiction, particularly in her effort to narrate the silences of colonial discourse.. Dai employs the great events of colonialism but to the life and feelings of those disadvantaged men and women who were the victims of those events.This is the case with the Black Hill which is organized around the historical fact of the assassination of the French Jesuit missionaries, Father Nicolas-Michel Krick and Augustin-Etienne Bourry, who was supposedly murdered by the Mishmi chief Kaisha (Kajinsha) in 1854. Dai purposely implements fictitious aspects that include the fiction character of Gimur to explain the unspoken, untold experiences that were not recorded by the official colonial documents. Dai recognized the fact that history is usually perceived in a precisely limited and biased way, thus she tries to offer a genuine and pluralistic interpretation of truth through the use of fictional characters and events. Such a move of reclaiming the narrative undermines the history of the colonial archives which favored portraying tribal opposition and sovereignty as barbarian or savage.

Dai subverts directly by putting voice to the chief in Gimur who tries to announce the innocence of the chief and claim his explanations. Such is the main theme of Kajinsha,

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who expresses the gap between cultures and epistemology when he writes: Tell them we also had some things to say. But we cannot read and write. So we tell stories". The fiction by Dai turns to be the means where the silenced, unwritten story is voiced, where the indigenous knowledge, cultural identity, and spiritual connection to the land is regarded as a significant part of historical reality. Thus, her work is a strong postcolonial resistance that employs the language of hope in rebuilding a fuller and culturally free history of her people.

Literature Review

Supriya M. "Narrating the silences of history: The black hill by Mamang Dai". Talks about the fictional interference of Dai with the historical accounts, the murder of French missionaries in particular, in which the author Gimur exposes the silences in order to destabilize the colonial historical narrative and establish the essential human connections.

Ananyaa, Prajnaa and AmarjeetNayak. *Storied Lands and Silenced Voices: The Black Hill* by Mamang Dai through the prism of Terristory. Makes use of the fact that the concept of terristory (the natural unity of land and narrative) can be used to show how Dai writing is reaffirming the relational knowledge of the Indigenous against colonial epistemic violence, which discredited orality and Indigenous land claims.

Verma, Saumya and Dr ManjariJohri. Change, Modernity, and Northeastern Identity: A Comparative Analysis of The Black Hill by Mamang Dai and Escaping the Land. Interprets the historical fiction of Dai in terms of postcolonial theory, such as hybridity and ambivalence, in terms of the strict attempts of the indigenous population to stay on the ground and their identity in the face of the colonial modernity and political struggle.

Preha C. et al. The Evolving Paradigms of Adi Tribal Identity A Postcolonial Reading of The Black Hill by Mamang Dai. Interprets The Black Hill through the cultural identity theory developed by Stuart Hall in order to demonstrate how the Adi identity is re-formed through colonial intervention, modes of hybridity and opposition, as opposed to being imposed.

Chakraborty, Paban. House, Identity and Environmental Justice in the Select Works of Mamang Dai: The Hidden Valleys of My Home. Suggests that the storytelling of Dai is a form of protest and environmental justice that prefigures the profound, traditional connection between the native people and the land and the inevitable onslaught of colonialism and modernization.

Ghosh, Papiya. Myth, Memory and Mamang: Writing Orality and Voicing the Marginal. Discusses the ways in which Dai deliberately adapts the oral tradition, rituals, myths of the Adi tribe to written literature, in effect, providing these marginalized cultural elements with a central and documented reference in history.

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Singh, Shubangingi and Dr Deepesh Kumar Thakur. *Reclaiming Lost Narratives: Cultural Memory, Historical Transformation and the Quest of Authenticity in Angami and Naga Literature.* Insights that Dai rewrites historical events and admits that oral accounts are peripheral since we cannot write and read, and as such the stories are essential to the creation of a sense of culture and the eradication of colonial affects.

Nampui, Lalsanlevis. *Merging Identity with Nature: The Legends of Pensam: an Ecofeminist Viewpoint*. Discusses how the identity, women, and nature have been assimilated in the work of Dai, emphasizes how the lives of the female characters reflect the ecological persecution by the patriarchal domination and external threats to the native lifeworld.

Methodology

This paper is mainly done through the Textual Analysis approach meaning attentively reading the historical fiction by Mamang Dai, and in this case, The Black Hill and then having additional insights based on the other novel she wrote, The Legends of Pensam. The central focus is to consider how Dai employs certain characters, conversations and plot lines to challenge and refute official historical accounts.

Elwin, Verrier use critical ideas of Indigenous Studies to comprehend the underpinning significance of tribal living, such as the influence of oral traditions, local myths, and the spiritual belief system that links the people to their surrounding. We also use Postcolonial Theory to examine the effect of historical trauma of colonial rule and the resultant political upheavals which perverted the identity of the indigenous people and the voice of the narrative. Through the combination of these aspects, the methodology dwells on how Dai purposefully employs fictional imagination to fill the silences in history, and thus, refashion the history of victimhood into the potent act of cultural retrieval and intellectual opposition. This strategy assists in showing how Dai renders the lives of overlooked historical characters visible and legitimate in a way that they are not ignored.

Oral Tradition and the Power of the Written Word

The essential of the historical fiction by Mamang Dai lies in the fact that this challenge to the set colonial dichotomy of the written history versus the oral tradition of indigenous peoples is the main focus of the work and thus the text can be regarded as a critical act of epistemic resistance. The state of Arunachal Pradesh, which was a preliterate society in the past, has an abundant cultural heritage which was discovered mainly through oral memory and the records of the travellers and visitors during the colonial times. Dai appreciates the fact that such dependence on orality implies that the history of the cultural state is frequently historyless and unrecorded. The colonial conflict is in the fact that, the written word being the most significant location of valid knowledge and civilised supremacy, the oral narrative is confined to the sphere of superstition, mythology, or barbarity.

Dai gets into this linguistic and cultural hierarchy. Being an insider, she takes an active initiative of a mission of cultural preservation, the objective of which is to gather and document these oral narratives. "You see, the little histories that were being forgotten about it". Supriya Mas she points out that "Dai writes as a way of seeking a territory rich with narratives, where myths, memory, and imagination create an inspirational world of continuous, enlivening world". Dai underlines that these native oral traditions are not mere stories, on the contrary, their meaning is found in the symbols that are presented in the narratives concerning the sacredness of life of what makes us human. These stories or collectively called Aabang in the Adi people are their classical literature and their history of evolution, and they traditionally were chanted by the Miri or shaman rhapsodist using a ritual language.

The counter-discourse formulated by Preha C is best expressed by the lives of those characters that aren't enjoying the fruits of colonialism. The Mishmi chief Kajinsha, who is the accused of the colonial machinery, in her great novel The Black Hill challenges the power relationship that suppresses his reality. He says to Gimur: Say of us, Kajinsha had said to her that night in the gaol. "Tell them we were good. And say to them we had some to say. But we cannot read and write. So we tell stories". Dai thus transforms fiction into a medium through which suppressed and unwritten truths can be articulated, giving voice to those marginalized by colonial history.In addition, Dai uses the indigenous relational ontology connecting narrative with the environment known as terristory by the critics. This is in opposition to the colonial perception of land as a commodity or empty space. Kajinsha has summarised this indigenous epistemology when he tells the French priest Father Krick. The Tibetan Lamas have books and you read your book to know about God. We read the land. The land is our book. The grass and the rocks and the stones all here on the hill are telling something, everything. This reading the land process is demonstrated as an epistemic practise, practised centuries old, based on experience: it is by being here that we learn what is good and what is sweet or bitter, by being here, by knowing what happens each day, what happens in the night, day by day, in the last 500 years. Through the combination of these aspects, Dai creates the fact that to the tribal communities, the last truth of the tribal inhabitants lies not in the short-lived writings of the coloniser but in the breathing living terrain of their native countries.

Subversion in The Black Hill

The Black Hill by Dai is a directly operating way of undermining the colonial discourse by describing the silence of the historical murder of the French missionaries, Father Nicholas-Michel Krick and Augustin-Etienne Bourry, who were killed by the Mishmi chief, Kajinsha (Kaisha) in 1854. The colonial history, the result of the letters that the priests had sent back to Paris and the punishment measures which were implemented after that, made Kajinsha a mere murderer and sentenced him to death. Nevertheless, these

documents say little about the opinions, incentives, and inner world of tribal people in question.

Dai fills this gap in history with fictional intervention, and in this context, one can speak mostly about Gimur, a brave, passionate woman, a representative of the aboriginal tribe of Abor. Gimur is specifically placed to speak out the missing storey and declare the innocence of Kajinsha. Although Gimur is a traditionalist, he is forward-looking and free enough to go against the tribal values, taking Kajinsha of the Mishmee tribe to live in the disputed borderland, between the Tibet and Mongolia. It is her fictional presence which enables Dai to bring on several points of view because of the profound fact that history is in fact a meeting place, there are so many possibilities that we do not really know what happened.

The main dramatic conflict is based on three different lives of the indigenous chief Kajinsha, the unconventional tribal woman Gimur, and the French priest Father Krick. Dai also employs the fictional building up to bring out the common humanity and emotional ties that cut across cultural and colonial lines. She fancies a chance of interaction between the priest and the chief somewhat longer, pleading that Krick was just starting to recognise that it was not about conversion but it was about speaking the language of the hearts. Dai creates a weird mystic connexion between Gimur and Krick, united by grief and affection in which the sound of the flute by the priest appeals to the inner conflict of Gimur.

In its turn, Gimur is the last witness and the custodian of the unspoken reality. When Krick is killed with the sword of chief Lamet (not Kajinsha, colonial history records), Gimur is there, in which case he closes his eyes. Krick dies and addresses Gimur murmuring "aenjal" (angel), one of the few moments of recognition and intimacy when Krick says: it was a moment they would both know each other regardless of the language. The inner voice of Gimur helps to realise that she had observed a great deal of humanity: "She saw nothing of the land whence he had come. It was a blank space. But here, among them, she had seen him was another ami man might be his eyes and nose, his skin and his clothes and the words he said were not the same; but she had known what that was his heart, his thoughts and his needs like theirs. This is the deep understanding of the novel that, even being not the same on the surface, all the humans are the same, and this is the last humanist response of the colonial gaze that shapes the other as lesser.

Instead of passive acceptance of the fate, the novel ends in the act of violent resistance which makes sure that the storey of the Kajinsha is documented in the official record, though in a distorted form. Gimur goes to Dibrugarh gaol to visit Kajinsha who is in prison where he is meant to be hanged. Gimur takes her knife and puts it in the throat of the prison guard who has sexually assaulted her. Dai directly links this fictional with the actual history by saying that the British archives mentioned that Kajinsha was hanged after murdering a prison guard, despite a mercy request. Dai admits: One of the guards in prison

I got Gimur to kill and that was the way this storey was done. This last scene is symbolic in the sense that although the execution of the chief is historically accurate, a previous event of righteous indigenous struggle and indomitable affection has been incorporated into the established narrative and no longer can be overlaid by the suppressed tribal viewpoint on history.

Decolonizing History and Imposing Indigenous Sovereignty

The narrative approach of Dai goes further than rectifying the historicity to actually reclaim indigenous sovereignty and cultural legitimacy by colonial and other state apparatus. This two-fold end is attained by the undeterred affirmation of the essential value of the Adi worldview, namely, its profound ecological and spiritual roots.The nature of the Adi community lies in the nature of their animistic religion and reverence to the environment. They live based on the ecology of the forest and their co-existence with nature. This is articulated by the faith in Donyi-Polo (Sun-Moon), the supreme deity and what she termed as physical expression of a supreme deity, or what she termed as world spirit. This native theology is also profoundly biocentric, which states the inherent value of all creatures - human and nonhuman and denies the anthropocentric perspective of humans being superior. All the components of land rocks, trees, rivers and hills are all seen to be sacred and alive and require reverence and repayment.

The tribal law and custom are based on this eco-spiritual worldview, which is the basis of what many critics recognise as the spiritual ecosystem of the area. Dai captures the impact of this view of the world in the everyday life of communities including that the spirits of the dead live in the natural world, and the shamans (miri) act as a mediator between the physical and the spiritual world. As an example, the myth of human-tiger kinship of the Mishmi Hills, which takes the killing of a tiger as an offence amounting to a serious moral crime, equivalent to homicide, serves as an essential ethical and ecological safeguard, and serves as an exemplar of how the Dibang Valley is a tiger-protected region of cultural protection.

Colonial agenda on the other hand placed the land under the prism of exploitation and mercantilism. Through the mouth of the mountain, Dai compares the colonial perception of nature as something to be domesticated or a threatening, menacing element with the native vision of nature as something unchanging and maternal, and healing: The past is re-created by the mountains. The mountain informs us about the life having particles of life grasping and sticking thousands of years. To the indigenous people, nature is ultimately the salver of political and personal trauma: Gimur finally receives spiritual healing following a very tragic period in his life by going back to the woodland hill that was always the refuge of her people.

The very approach of Dai towards the use of the foreign language, the English

language, called miglun by the coloniser to narrate native storeys, is a way of abrogating and appropriating indigenous cultural shades in a foreign language. She intentionally uses slang words such as "miglun" (British) and "apong" (rice beer), so that the storey still has a certain local taste. This controlled hybridity opposes the supremacy of colonial language, which makes it possible to implement the native speech and dialect.

Moreover, her narrative is structurally active whereby she challenges the colonial determination of linear, single, and authoritative history. An example is The Legends of Pensam, which is constructed as a complex document, a collection of nineteen unrelated, episodic storeys that do not follow a conventional single hero and narrative structure. This non-linear, meandering shape resembles the cyclical aspect of the traditional tribal knowledge and cosmologies due to the notion that the Adi worldview should see time and reality as interconnected and dynamic. This aesthetic decision compels a de-colonial epistemic switch stating the legitimacy of the native view that narratives and history co-exist at the same time on the Pensam, the in-between zone of myth and reality. The way that the novel integrates the myth, history and memoir to document the history of the Adi tribe implies that the fiction by Dai is a multi-faceted and vibrant tool of projecting indigenous cultural sovereignty.

The Trauma and Identity Dimensions of the Periphery

Although in her historical fiction Dai dwells on the colonial contact, her whole work seems to be the effect of historical trauma and the constant conflict in the identity of indigenous people despite all the modern pressures. The historical trauma is the cumulative psychological trauma of a community through generations as a result of such events as colonisation, displacement, and war. The historical process of the region that took place since the North East Frontier Agency (NEFA) was transformed into the Arunachal Pradesh can be marked by the colonial conquest, internal colonisation, and the socio-political changes. The characters in this history are struggling with this feeling of being hybrid and ambivalent, in between the urge to maintain their traditional lifestyle and the enticement of modernization.

In *The Legends of Pensam* this internal conflict has been addressed by the idea of Pensam, which is the in-between space. This is the space that represents the dilemma of the new generation who is in between the necessary eruption with the spell of the past and the necessity, who are required to re-model their lives according to the changing times. This shift subjects the natives to the freedom of Western modernity, the Christian religion and individualism as a lifestyle. According to Dai, globalisation and modernization is threatening to take away their cultural identity and ruin the past sense of joy. The ancient race cries: The ancient days of fighting and courage had died. They had given away their ancestral lands to the government and now the road and all that went along with it appeared to be choking them and ready to rob the identity, similar to the thief creeping into their

villages and fields.

This force causes cultural displacement. The displacement is experienced in a mental and spiritual form even in cases where the displacement is not in a physical form. In the case of Adna in Stupid Cupid, a move to the city means alienation and spiritual emptiness, and the way dissociation with nature that results in spiritual degeneration can take place upon being cut off by ecological origins. The main character later goes on a spiritual journey to reconnect with the lost relationships to show that there is no peace and identity without the ancestral land.

The Faithfulness of Hope and Recollection.

With the oppression of colonialism and the political conflict Dai insists on illustrating the persistence and the spirit of her people that can endure. She has always related her literature to the issue of hope. The ability of the community to negotiate change actively and its collective memory is its source of strength. Storytelling in itself turns out to be an essential means of preserving the cultural identity, dealing with the historical trauma. The communal aspect of ritualistic dissemination of myths and legends strengthening kinship and identity serves as the communal remedy to erasure and strife. According to the mountain poem, memory is concealed in the long body of the mountain, and it is a storage facility of the past events and traditions.

Dai in his work does not require society to reject change but rather comes to an agreement with it. She portrays that change is unavoidable: why should we fear change? Rakut was arguing. 'Change is a wonderful thing! It is merely one of permutation, a time of tremendous opportunities! Why should we be so afraid?" This optimism is based on the belief that continuity of cultures is not done by preservation, but by vigorously supporting the indigenous identity and the intrinsic values: The traditions that survive are those that are exercised. The works of Dai can thus be considered as strong measures of cultural salvaging, where despite the fact that the lives are over, the tale the mass memory of the people is not.

The historical fiction of Mamang Dai, in the very phrase of which the author says nothing but narrates the silences, is a deep literary analysis of how the oppressed groups express themselves through oral history and fantasy storeys in order to challenge and eventually escape the colonial discourse. With the help of the methodology based on the textual analysis through the prism of the Indigenous and Postcolonial theory, this paper has been able to show how Dai carefully restored the "historical truth".

The main strategy is to reverse the colonial order in which written history was dominant, and indigenous orality will be turned into a strong tool of epistemic power. By the critical application of the fictional character Gimur in The Black Hill, Dai manages to fill in the mysterious silence of official archives concerning the destiny of Kajinsha and Father Krick. This Thelma and Louise narrative intervention forms a moral and human

situation that was not documented in colonial records and argues that, regardless of the tremendous cultural differences, human emotion love, sorrow, and identity transcend the political boundaries under the colonial gaze. By thus doing a twofold subversion, Dai does not only correct the historical record but also goes on to legitimise the indigenous belief system that has been based on the earth as the final source of knowledge and morality.

Conclusion

The work by Dai ultimately constitutes a statement of indigenous cultural sovereignty that is based on the Adi eco-spiritual philosophy of Donyi-Polo that creates a strong biocentric vision in which land is seen as a living spirit that requires reciprocity. Virginianizing the movements of struggle against colonialism and modernization as the movements of the maintenance of this spiritual ecosystem, Dai links the local trauma with the universal search to the sustainable life and identity. Her fiction makes certain that the lifelong experience of the Northeast its conflicts, traumas, and strength are heard, becoming part of the international discussion by clarifying that identity is an ever-changing process, constantly enhanced by the interaction of memory, tradition, and the language of hope that is indestructible. The last legacy of Dai lies in the rebellious ideology that, despite the killing of lives, there is a storey-never.

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