

Foreshadowing Naturalism: An Exploration of Realism and Naturalism in The Poetry of Mamang Dai

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Abstract

Mamang Dai's poetry is scrutinized in this study with an emphasis on how she reinterprets naturalism and realism to express and recover Northeast India's indigenous identity. As an Adi writer from Arunachal Pradesh, Dai weaves together oral traditions, cultural memory, and sacred landscapes to create a poetic voice that defies stereotypes of tribal communities and fights against cultural erasure. Her poetry engages with more general postcolonial and de-colonial discourses while fusing mythic consciousness with ecological sensitivity to create a unique indigenous poetics grounded in lived experience.

Dai emphasizes the deep interdependence between humans and nature by reshaping realism through an indigenous worldview that encompasses tribal life's spiritual and cosmological aspects in addition to its material realities. This essay contends that her poetry serves as a subdued but potent form of cultural resistance and resiliency in Indian English literature, reclaiming endangered knowledge systems, recovering marginalized histories, and reaffirming tribal subjectivity. A rethinking of realism as a dynamic, culturally grounded narrative mode that respects the interconnectedness of land, language, memory, and identity is thus encouraged by Dai's work, which significantly advances postcolonial ecocriticism and indigenous literary studies.

Keywords: *naturalism, realism, colonial, postcolonial, tribals, poems, environment*

I. Introduction

One of Arunachal Pradesh's most important literary voices, Mamang Dai's poetry demonstrates a profound interest in indigenous myth, ecology, memory, and history. Dai draws heavily from the sociocultural realities, oral traditions, and landscapes of Northeast India as a member of the Adi tribe. Her literary works emphasize the lived experiences of tribal communities that have long been marginalized within prevailing literary and historical narratives, acting as both a political intervention and an artistic expression. In Indian English literature, Dai holds a unique place as it navigates the boundaries between the local and the global, the mythic and the material, and the personal and the collective. As a result, her poetry serves as a crucial platform for cultural affirmation and resistance.

The study looks at how Mamang Dai uses naturalism and realism as de-colonial tactics to recover indigenous subjectivity and historical agency, in addition to using them as literary devices. Dai modifies the mode to reflect indigenous epistemologies and experiential truths rather than upholding Eurocentric ideas of realism as an objective depiction of external reality. Her realism questions the dichotomies imposed by colonial and postcolonial discourse, such as nature versus culture, myth versus history, and tribal versus modern, and is inextricably linked to nature, myth, and oral memory. Dai provides a different perspective on reality through an eco-poetic and cosmological vision based on indigenous belief systems.

II. Background of the study

Social conditions, empirical detail, and environmental determinism were the focuses of nineteenth-century European and American literary movements that have historically been linked to realism and naturalism. However, these frameworks frequently overlook the ways in which non-Western authors modify these modes to express worldviews that are culturally specific. In contrast to Western determinism, Dai's poetic naturalism emphasizes the interdependence of people, land, and spiritual life a viewpoint that is essential to indigenous thought systems.

Dai's use of realism also contradicts the anthropological and eroticized depictions of tribal communities that are frequently present in popular narratives. By highlighting the uniqueness of Adi rituals, customs, and oral traditions, she challenges stereotypes of Northeast India and establishes a voice that is indigenous and self-representative. Tribal perspectives have historically been silenced by hegemonic structures, so this act of cultural reclamation is intrinsically political. Her poetry thus serves as a counter-narrative, reclaiming cultural sovereignty and indigenous knowledge systems.

The theories of literary realism and naturalism modified in postcolonial literary discourse serve as the foundation for this study. Furthermore, it examines the connections between ecological consciousness and cultural identity in Dai's poetry by drawing on postcolonial ecocriticism. When combined, these frameworks allow for a more nuanced understanding of how Dai reflects the material circumstances as well as the symbolic struggles of Northeast Indian indigenous communities

III. Rational of the study

In order to express the unique indigenous identity and ecological consciousness of Northeast India, Mamang Dai's poetry revitalizes and reconfigures literary realism and naturalism traditions. Her work actively utilizes these literary modes through an ecocentric, indigenous worldview, rather than merely foreshadowing naturalism. Dai's poetry is a potent form of resistance against environmental degradation and cultural erasure because it combines mythic consciousness with tangible reality.

➤ Naturalism and Realism: The eco-centric viewpoint

Dai constantly refocuses attention from human-centered issues to an eco-centric perspective that emphasizes the natural world and non-human life. In her poetry, nature reflects the fundamental values of indigenous communities by being a living, sentient, and agency-rich presence rather than a passive environment.

➤ Meticulous Landscape Illustration

She describes the mountains, rivers, forests, flora, and fauna of Arunachal Pradesh in her poems in a way that is both intimate and vivid. Her work is grounded in lived and observable experience through her meticulous attention to particular geographical and material details.

➤ Veracities of Culture and Society

Dai chronicles the cultural and social changes that indigenous communities have to deal with because of urbanization, modernization, and political unrest. By realistically portraying marginalized lives and histories, she captures the "slow violence" of environmental destruction and the deterioration of traditional knowledge.

➤ Interdependence and Kinship

Her emphasis on the profound interdependence between people and nature reveals aspects of naturalism. Dai rejects hierarchical distinctions between humans and the natural world by highlighting shared material and spiritual ties, drawing on her Adi heritage and beliefs such as the "Man and Tiger brotherhood" or the notion that we are "children of the rain."

➤ Essential Themes and Poetic Devices: The Oral Tradition and Myth

Dai incorporates oral traditions, myth, and folklore as essential manifestations of indigenous reality. Instead of being decorative, these stories act as archives of ecological knowledge, cultural memory, and sustainable practices.

➤ The symbolism of Naturalism and Realism

To convey complicated ecological and cultural issues, she uses evocative symbols like the "last tree," which stands for biodiversity loss, and the "river," which represents cultural continuity and the passage of time and life.

➤ The Eco-critical Vision

Overall, Dai's poetry offers a strong eco-critical position that calls for a reevaluation of the relationship between humans and nature. Her art challenges prevailing, resource-driven viewpoints and emphasizes the pressing need for ecological harmony by highlighting indigenous value systems based on balance and respect for the environment.

IV. Review of Literature

Dasgupta, S. (2022) postulated that natural elements are personified and given voice, memory, and suffering in poems such as "The Voice of the Mountain" and "Small Towns and the River." The naturalistic notion of nature as an independent and potent force is strengthened by the roles that mountains and rivers play as collective identities and spiritual forces. In poems like "The Balm of Time" and "Small Towns and the River," Dai depicts the natural world not as a passive background but as an active, sentient presence. The river serves both practical and symbolic purposes, bearing witness to cultural transformation, preserving historical continuity, and transporting ancestors' memories. These depictions are in line with postcolonial eco-critical viewpoints that connect histories of marginalization and resistance with ecological consciousness.

Sinha, N. (2023) hypothesized that Dai's use of realism also contradicts the anthropological and eroticized depictions of tribal communities that are frequently present in popular narratives. By highlighting the uniqueness of Adi rituals, customs, and oral traditions, she challenges stereotypes of Northeast India and establishes a voice that is indigenous and self-representative. Tribal perspectives have historically been silenced by hegemonic structures, so this act of cultural reclamation is intrinsically political. Her poetry thus serves as a counter-narrative, reclaiming cultural sovereignty and indigenous knowledge systems.

V. Discussion

Mamang Dai's poetry expresses both an individual poetic self and the collective history of the people of her region. Like many ethnic minority poets, Dai employs traditional local knowledge and folklore as a key literary strategy. Her poems are rich with images of intangible cultural heritage such as songs, rituals, myths, native languages, and the local landscape. The spiritual realm inhabited by spirits, gods, and goddesses is woven naturally into her verse. Alongside this, Dai allude to exemplary male figures while simultaneously emphasizing the significance of women and children. Local practices such as dancing and hunting are vividly depicted. Across the twenty-three poems in this selection, folklore functions as an ancestral cord that connects the poet to her regional roots. Through this recovery of traditional tribal values, Dai asserts a collective identity and seeks to heal a wounded region marked by violence and disruption.

The poem "Tapu" is divided into two sections. In the first, the poetic "I" highlights the heroic nature of warriors who have fulfilled their communal duties. This section refers to the Tapu dance ritual, which Dai explains in a footnote:

*Here we have marked the land
With upright branches and stones
And consecrated territory with song,
And the leap of the warrior returning triumphant.
In this diagram looking through the sun's face,
Peeping through the moon,
The meaning of life is
Contained in fulfilling obligation.
Mark the sword.
Mark the sound.*

(Tapu, Lines-20-28)

"Tapu" is a dance performed by men during the time of community fencing. Today it is viewed as a war dance performed to exorcise malevolent spirits. Such traditional practices in North-East India have become important sites for constructing, negotiating, and displaying ethnic identity through song, dance, and costume. However, the poem later shifts its focus to the metaphor of conception. Dai's footnote continues:

*What are the words we will tell our sons and daughters?
That dying is not so hard if the image survives.*

(Tapu, Lines-12-13)

This belief has largely remained on the margins of cultural knowledge. In most contemporary representations of the Tapu ritual, women are absent, and the dominant visual and auditory symbols such as swords and sounds are associated solely with warfare. The poetic voice questions this omission, calling attention to the neglected dimensions of the tradition. Today, Tapu is often reduced to a tourist attraction, showcased at festival grounds sponsored by local governments.

The poem then reimagines conception as a metaphor parallel to the fencing ritual. Dai presents a scenario in which women perform the dance, culminating in the same cyclical imagery of the sun that accompanies the warriors' dance. Children are described as blessings, while the "sighs of the unborn" are heard only in dreams. The landscape becomes eternal, shaped by hope, longing, and faith, where fear is driven into the dust and the mountains encircle the sun in a powerful image of continuity and renewal.

Many poems in this collection explore the tension between change and continuity in tradition. For instance, "An Obscure Place" addresses the conflict between official history and oral tradition, expressing feelings of alienation and displacement. The poem begins by asserting that the history of the people originates in storytelling rather than written records, emphasizing uncertainty about linguistic and historical belonging.

*The History of our race begins with the place of stories.
We do not know if the language
We speak belongs to a written past.
Nothing is certain.*

(An Obscure Place, Lines-04-06)

The poem then reflects on the consequences of masculine battles fought in the name of homeland, highlighting the absence of compensation for loss and death. The imagery of mountains, rivers, and journeys underscores exhaustion and futility rather than triumph. Women and children appear as silent victims, hiding their faces and suppressing speech, while outsiders pass through the land in pursuit of glory. Ultimately, houses, men, and villages are transformed into stone, symbolizing devastation and stagnation.

*There are mountains.
Oh! There are mountains.
We climbed every slope.
We slept by the river.*

But do not speak of victory
yet! An obscure place haunts the hunter.
The prize slips away.
Yesterday the women hid their faces.
They forbade their children to speak.
Yesterday we gave shelter to men
Who climbed over our hills?
For glory of a homeland,
They said - those who know what knowing is,
And now the sleeping houses,
The men and the villages have turned to stone.

(An Obscure Place, Lines-11-22)

In the subsequent lines, the poetic voice have representations of violence and exposes the fear instilled by those who invade and exploit the land. The once-intimate relationship between indigenous people and the wilderness is shown to be deteriorating. The destruction of flora and fauna is closely linked to maternal imagery, serving as a metaphor for lost identity. Nature, in its holistic form, represents the collective identity of the people, making its destruction an act of cultural erasure. This ecological loss becomes a powerful means through which Dai asserts her community's identity in the face of cultural and political domination.

The poem concludes by returning to images of mountains and rivers. Here, the mountains are no longer mere scenery but active subjects that embody the convergence of nature and history. Through them, Dai seeks an ancestral connection that may guide her back to lost origins. This imagery is especially significant given that Arunachal Pradesh is literally "*The Land of the Dawn-Lit Mountains*" is one of the greenest regions of India and the first to receive sunlight each day. In Dai's poetry, the mountains are omniscient, symbolizing both collective hope and deep-rooted fears in a rapidly changing society.

In her essay "*The Nature of Faith and Worship among the Adis*," Dai explains how forests, mountains, and the environment shaped the consciousness of the Adi people. She describes sacred practices such as decorating the Pator Gate with ginger-tipped arrows and branches of the sacred Taan tree to protect against evil forces. Overall, Dai's poetry advocates for the preservation of culture and tradition. Nature imagery is closely tied to identity, fluidity, and ancestral belonging, standing in contrast to the forces of modernization. Nature is portrayed as an extension of cultural roots and Dai emerges as a voice positioned between a fading past and an uncertain future. Her work reflects nostalgia, cultural change, and minority experience. The recurring theme of "*revival*" suggests that her poetry functions as a medium for cultural transmission and a lament for the loss of mother-tongue languages. These characteristics allow Mamang Dai to be classified as a folklore writer. As a modern journalist and poet, she occupies a dual role as both tradition-bearer and innovator, navigating social and ecological change while shaping ethnic identity for diverse audiences.

Mamang Dai's poetry provides striking depictions of the natural world entwined with themes of memory, loss, and survival, particularly in anthologies like *River Poems* (2004) and *The Balm of Time* (2008). Dai creates a literary ecology in poems such as "*The Missing Link*" and "*The Voice of the Mountain*," where nature actively participates in the construction of identity rather than serving as a passive backdrop. Her poetic expression of resistance against cultural erasure is strengthened by her incorporation of myth and oral tradition.

Dai's poetry reveals a deep awareness of the seasons, rivers, forests, and spiritual rhythms of Northeast India's daily existence. She creates a realist framework in poems like "*The Balm of Time*" and "*The Missing Link*," which firmly places the tribal subject within the specificity of place and history. In addition to demonstrating a dedication to physical reality, her focus on the materiality of the landscape earth, water, and sky asserts a cultural geography that defies historical erasure.

In Dai's poetry, realism is inextricably linked to ancestry and oral memory. Whether it's lost villages, customs, or mythological characters, remembering becomes an act of cultural survival. Dai's realism thus serves as a counter colonial tactic, opposing prevailing national narratives that ignore or marginalize tribal experiences. Dai's poetry effectively satisfies the function of postcolonial realism, which can reconfigure realist aesthetics to recover suppressed histories.

Dai's naturalism highlights the intricate relationship between human life and the natural world, while her realism depicts sociopolitical realities. This represents a spiritual ecology where nature has agency, memory, and moral presence rather than a deterministic naturalism based on social Darwinism. Forests, rivers, and mountains become living things that influence ethical systems and cultural identities.

Dai challenges anthropocentric ideas of modernity in "*Small Towns and the River*" by presenting nature as cyclical and limitless. This vision upholds an indigenous naturalism that holds that ecological consciousness and human

existence are inextricably linked. The concept of "grounded normativity," which emphasizes ethical systems derived from land-based indigenous practices, is consistent with this viewpoint.

Dai's poetic voice is distinguished by philosophical depth and lyrical restraint. She uses tone, form, and symbolic imagery to subtly resist rather than overtly. She opposes the sentimentalization of indigenous suffering as well as the commercialization of tribal culture through evocative metaphors and simple language. She engages in resistance through her use of the English language itself. Dai turns English, the language of colonizers, into a medium of indigenous expression by incorporating indigenous rhythms, metaphors, and sensibilities.

Dai's dedication to cultural reclamation is central to his poetry. Ancestral stories, sacred geographies, and endangered knowledge systems are all preserved in her work. Dai's poetry becomes a testament in a postcolonial setting where indigenous identities are frequently obscured. She affirms the resilience and continuity of indigenous life while also bearing witness to cultural loss, displacement, and trauma brought on by development. The decolonial turn in indigenous studies, which aims to reclaim suppressed epistemologies and restore dignity to marginalized communities, is consistent with Dai's poetic vision. Reclaiming identity, according to Dai, entails both resistance and renewal resurrecting spiritual and ecological wisdom that has been marginalized by modernity.

VI. Conclusion

A potent fusion of realism, naturalism, and indigenous resistance can be found in Mamang Dai's poetry. She emphasizes the lived realities and cosmologies of the Adi tribe and other indigenous communities of Northeast India through her deeply political and artistic engagement with landscape, myth, and oral tradition. Dai challenges prevailing Indian English literary paradigms that have traditionally ignored tribal voices through this engagement.

Dai broadens the definition of realism beyond Euro-American customs by redefining it in terms of indigenous epistemologies. Her realism, which is based on memory, landscape, and sacred interconnectedness, is ontological rather than merely representational. In a similar vein, her naturalism prioritizes cultural continuity and ecological symbiosis over deterministic fatalism. This synthesis makes it possible to resist postcolonial homogenization, cultural invisibility, and historical amnesia in a quiet but transformative way.

Mamang Dai's poetry is a powerful blend of literary style and political intent. In doing so, she reclaims a crucial space for tribal subjectivity in Indian English literature while expanding the aesthetic possibilities of realism and naturalism through an indigenous lens. Dai offers a poetic response to histories of marginalization and erasure through her ecopoetic vision, articulating a potent mode of resistance based on memory, identity, and belonging.

When taken as a whole, these critical viewpoints show how Mamang Dai's poetry sits at a crucial nexus of naturalism, realism, and indigenous revival. Dai's work at the center of discussions on identity, resistance, and literary decolonization, whereas earlier scholarship frequently placed literature from Northeast India at the periphery of Indian English writing. The naturalist aspects of her poetry, in particular the ways that survival, environmental forces, and an unavoidable sense of fate influence her indigenous realism, still require ongoing critical attention. This essay fills this gap by providing a comprehensive interpretation of naturalism and realism in Dai's poetic oeuvre as aesthetic and political instruments of cultural reclamation and resistance.

In the end, Mamang Dai's poetic legacy serves as a testament to the transformational potential of literature as a platform for cultural survival, resistance, and renewal. Her writing encourages both readers and academics to delve deeply into indigenous worldviews and reconsider literary canons from the viewpoints of people who have been historically marginalized. Her poetry serves as both a haven and a place of struggle, demonstrating that persistent affirmation of identity in a world that is constantly changing, language reclamation, and storytelling are frequently the sources of enduring resistance.

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