



Juxtaposition of Myth, Ethnicity and Religion: A Study of Mamang Dai's *River Poems*.

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Abstract :

Mamang Dai (1957-), the established; powerful voice from Arunachal Pradesh, chronicles through her literary creations the rich and antique cultural tradition of her motherland. Rooted deeply in her ethnic background, Dai has responded to issues arising out of conflicts in folk culture due to globalisation, colonisation etc. A true believer in Pantheistic Philosophy, Dai celebrates through her poems the animist tradition of her tribe, barely known to the world outside. Mamang Dai celebrates the ecological glory of her region in her poems. Most of the poems written by Mamang Dai have been studied from the perspective of eco-feminist awareness. However, the aim of this paper is to discuss how Mamang Dai's poetry is a wilful projection of the mythological origin, ethnic and religious practices of her own tribe with reference to some select poems included in *River Poems* (2004). It is interesting to note that Dai's poetry cannot be viewed in isolation leaving aside her tribal background. It is the revelation of not only her individual poetic self but the unexposed remote history of the people in general. Through juxtaposition of myth, ethnicity and religion, Dai attempts to foreground the exceptional, exotic and unique culture of the tribal community residing in the remotest corner of the country. This delineation can also be viewed as a form of survival strategy for preserving the indigenous culture from the external influences.

Key words: *Myth, Ethnicity, Pantheistic Philosophy.*

Introduction :

Mamang Dai is a well-known literary figure hailing from "the land of the rising sun", i.e. Arunachal Pradesh. Before entering into the literary field, Mamang Dai served as a journalist and activist who worked as a programme officer with World Wide Fund for Nature (WWF) in the Eastern Himalayan Biodiversity Hotchpotch Programme. This notable writer chronicles the

unwritten history of her state through her literary works. The novels, short stories as well as the poems written by Mamang Dai made her a representative writer from the North-East. She has written novels like *The Legends of Pensam*, *Stupid Cupid*, *The Black Hill* etc. She authored the book *Arunachal Pradesh-The Hidden Land*. For her novel, *The Black Hill* she was awarded with the prestigious Sahitya Akademi Award in



2017. Dai's poems were published in various Indian journals and in 2004, she brought out a collection of her poems entitled *River Poems*. Her other two collections of poetry include *The Balm of Time* and *Midsummer Survival Lyrics*. In recognition of her varied contribution in the field of literature and education, Mamang Dai is awarded with Padma Shri in 2011. In the poetry of Mamang Dai we find frequent use of myth, stating the ethnic origin and religious beliefs of the Adi tribe to which she belongs. The present study is an attempt to analyse how Mamang Dai juxtaposes myth, ethnicity and religion in her poetry with special reference to *River Poems*.

Objectives of the study :

1. To find out how Mamang Dai's poetry depicts the unwritten oral history of Adi Community.
2. To explore how the poems contained in *River Poems* are the replication of Pantheistic Philosophy and Donyi-Polo religion.
3. To explore if Dai's poems can be analyzed in terms of utopian views of the past or issues concerning human-nature conflict.

Methodology :

It will be a textual study of some select poems from *River Poems* using the basic concepts of ethnicity, myth and Donyi-Polo faith with the help of primary and secondary data available on the chosen text.

Before making an analysis of the chosen poems, it will be reasonable to explain in details the origin and reception of the terms Myth and Ethnicity and the practised religion of the Adi people. M.H. Abrams, in *A Glossary of Literary Terms*, defines Myth as follows: "Myth is one story, in a mythology- a system of

hereditary stories which were once believed to be true by a particular cultural group, and which served to explain (in terms of the intentions and actions of deities and other supernatural beings) why the world is as it is and things happen as they do, to provide a rationale for social customs and observances, and to establish the sanctions for the rules by which people conduct their lives" (122). Stories related to the origin of crops, animals, humans etc. form the subject matter of myths. Myths are generally related with the social rituals, religious ceremonies. Mamang Dai's poetry is full of stories related to her ethnic descent.

The Oxford Dictionary of Sociology defines Ethnicity as "Individuals who consider themselves, or are considered by others, to share common cultural characteristics that differentiate them from the other collectivities in a society, and from which they develop their distinctive behaviour, form and ethnic group." (Scott: 2014.p.221). Each ethnic group has its unique features which are identical in terms of their language, culture race etc.

From the official website of Government of Arunachal Pradesh, we have come to know about the religious practices of the Adi people. Here it is mentioned that though "Sedi-Melo is regarded as the creator,—they believe in and worship Donyi-Polo, the Sun-Moon duality. To them, Donyi-Polo is not the physical Sun and Moon but an unseen supreme power, which is omni-present, omniscient and omnipotent. On the other hand, the people also believe in the existence of numbers of spirits, which are both malevolent and benevolent." (<https://roing.nic.in/culture-heritage/adis/>, accessed on 2/11/2021)



Pantheism is basically a principle of religious philosophy extensively used by a group of poets of literature and philosophy who considers that God is all-pervading. Pantheists opine that the Universe (Nature) and God are indistinguishable. They don't believe in a supreme creator. The concept of pantheism appears in the works produced by different writers from different ages. Adi people believe in the union between Nature and Spirit. In Donyi-Polo, every element is seen as the replica of a worshipping deity.

This faith in Donyi Polo is similar to that of Pantheistic philosophy practised by writers like Goethe, Coleridge, Wordsworth, Emerson, Walt Whitman etc. All these writers ardently believe that God is identical with the real world. Coleridge's poem "Forst at Mid-night" can be referred in this case. Coleridge hopes a better future for his baby sleeping in a cradle specially amidst natural setting where she will be able to hear-

"The lovely shapes and sounds intelligible
Of that eternal language, which thy God
Utters, who from eternity doth teach
Himself in all, and all things in himself."

(*Poems Old and New* 57)

Similar belief concerning God and nature is found in Whitman's "Song of Myself". This is the basic idea governing pantheistic philosophy. According to Encyclopedia Britannica, Pantheism is "The doctrine that the universe conceived of as a whole is God and, conversely that there is no God but the combined substances, forces and laws that are manifested in the existing universe" (Reese). The idea can be further explained with the help of Wordsworth's poetry. Wordsworth

gave life to all the objects of nature and made communication between them possible. He witnessed the presence of emotions, feelings amidst nature. He had a belief that each object of nature had a life of its own. As for example, we can refer to Wordsworth's famous poem "Lines written in Early Spring". In this particular poem every object of nature is described as a living being as indicated through the use of lines like 'the periwinkle trailed its wreaths' (10) and "every flower enjoys the air its breathes" (12) etc. The idea of Pantheism is implicitly contrary to oneness of God. Wordsworth in "Tintern Abbey" (*Poems Old and New* 45) holds the idea that nature is part of a divine presence which "rolls through all things" (105), indirectly suggesting that God and nature is identical with each other.

Mamang Dai, being a member of the Adi community is also a believer in Pantheistic philosophy. She is emotionally attached to her own region and her poetry depicts the ecological concern of the North East. As mentioned earlier, she was associated with organisations like WWF and Bio diversity conservation programme which might help in shaping her attitude towards nature. This close proximity with nature may be considered as another reason of her belief in Pantheism.

She viewed Nature and God as inseparable identities. According to Oshong Ering, the Adis recognize all things on earth such as, "[the] mountains and hills, the evergreen forest, the rushing rivers and rivulets, the animals and birds, the moving cloud and rain-fall, the shining objects in the sky" (35) as sacred unit. Mamang Dai once mentioned about this "world spirit" as follows:



“The traditional belief of the Adi community to which I belong is full of this union [between man and nature]. Everything has life—rocks, stones, 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” (Singha3). This spirit is the basic strength of *River Poems*.

Discussion:

Mamang Dai is deeply rooted in her culture. Not only through her novels, but also through the poetic creations, Dai depicts the mythical origin as well as religious beliefs of her community. A close examination of some of the select poems from the chosen text reveals her deep concern and adherence towards her own culture. She is a pantheist at heart who views nature and humans as identical with each other. In her poetic world, natural objects speak, dance, mourn like that of human world.

River Poems, as a whole contains 51 poems. A close reading of these poems reveals the hidden treasure of the tribal community, specifically the Adi tribe of Arunachal Pradesh embedded in the form of songs, seasonal festivals, ritual rites etc. Apart from all these we also come across the religious beliefs of the Adi tribe and their ethnic origin. The tribes of Arunachal prefer to live in harmony with Nature. Nature is the source of their inspiration and respiration. They consider Nature as their benevolent mother. Mamang Dai is also a nature lover. Her ideas governing Nature stem from her adherence to the Donyi-Polo religion like other members of her community. Mamang Dai was born and

brought up in Pasighat amidst a pure natural setting. The mesmerizing beauty of her motherland is well known to all. The geography of the landscape is a source of inspiration for her poetic world.

In the poem, “The Missing Link”, Mamang Dai refers to the river as the “Vein of our lives” (11). It is scientifically proven that without veins, our body cannot operate as it carries blood to our heart. Life cannot be perceived in absence of blood and veins. Equating river with that of vein, Mamang Dai shows the impossibility of separating human from Nature. Both these entities are same. Again in “Small Towns and the River”, Dai mentions that, “The river has a soul.” (29). The very title of this poetry collection itself asserts how Dai is quite influenced by the forces of the river. Vilas Sarang rightly observes: “Indian English poets are ‘river poets.’ Poems on river abound,” (*Indian English Poetry* 13). This observation is quite applicable in case of the poetry of Mamang Dai.

Similar concept of attributing human qualities to natural objects is also evident in Dai’s another poem entitled “The Balm of Time”. This poem is an example how Dai mixes ethnic religion with pantheistic philosophy. Adis believe in a number of spirits as mentioned by Dai:

“Yes, I believe in gods.

In the forest faith of good and evil,

Spirits of the river,

and the dream world of the dawn.” (57)

In another stanza, she vividly describes how the tribal people live merrily in the bosom of Mother Nature. Every object of nature is seen comprehending the palpitation of human heart.



Dreaming in the treetops children hear voices.
Whispering, the fatal wind appoints everything
Staking a claim a twig or a fern
Wil foretell destiny.
The mountain knows
How we pressed our hearts against its earth
....
The sky wind knows
How we grew flowers in fields of stone. (57)

In another poem, entitled “Sky Song”, evening is personified as a pharmaceutical scientist, capable of making medicines. Sometimes she calls it a doctor prescribing medicine for the patient (in the form of cloud). This identification of natural objects with human is a common feature found in the poetry of Mamang Dai. The poem “Birthplace” speaks about Dai’s sincere acknowledgement concerning her ethnic origin and belief in the indivisible unity of human being and the objects of nature.

We are the children of the rain
of the cloud woman
brother to the stone and bat
in our cradle of bamboo and vine
in our long houses we slept,
and when morning came
we were refreshed. (79)

Not only the Adis, other tribes residing in Arunachal Pradesh construct their houses using the locally available materials like bamboos, woods, canes, leaves etc. Normally, there is a big hall in each household for the purpose of sleeping and doing other daily activities.

This close proximity between man and nature is a recurrent theme in Dai’s poetry. Nature is like a kin for the Adi people. They are nurtured

by nature. The Mountains, the rivers, the forest all design the beliefs, rites and customs of the villages. In her poetry, she reflects the Arunachalee culture and traditions highlighting the glorious heritage. A keen explorer of heritage, she seems to be sentinel of traditional tribal values. She voices her emotions and feelings through the images and metaphors chosen mostly from nature. She reveals her beliefs in tribal faith through the poem “Rain”, where she speaks about the spirit of the Jungle:

In the sound of the rain
Is contained
All the spirit of the jungle.
Living, breathing,
Crushed, regenerative
Dark, always watchful. (25)

It is mentioned earlier that the Adis believed in the existence of number of spirits and they constitute the very foundation of ethnic origin. Numerous poems contained in the chosen text reveals the mysterious past of the people of Arunachal Pradesh. The first poem of this anthology entitled “The Missing Link” bears the testimony of Arunachal Pradesh’s mysterious past. Here there is a line which mentions about the “Poisonous ritual” performed by the early people and the tribes living in caves. The poem is written before the advent of Christianity in Arunachal Pradesh, when Arunachal Pradesh was not separated from seven sisters. During those days people used to perform poisonous rituals wearing red robes. Again there is a reference to men and women dwelling in the caves and “guarding the hooded poison” (11), most probably the giant water bugs.

Although Arunachal Pradesh is the abode of many indigenous tribes and sub tribes, it is



surprising to note that each tribe is different from the other in terms of their language, religion and cultural practices. In fact, Arunachal Pradesh is a land of multifaceted cultural diversities. The traditional folk dances performed during various seasonal festivals form the basic culture of the Adis. They are very much conscious regarding the preservation of their own culture. This cultural consciousness and reliance is a part and parcel of their life. Due to colonisation, with the arrival of Christianity, there comes a threat to the native religion. So, the institutionalisation of indigenous religion has become an alternative for preserving their native culture. According to S. K. Chaudhuri, "The Adi was the first community in the state to institutionalise their indigenous religion and start a new reformist movement." (*Asian Ethnology* 261). Donyi-Poloism serves as a form of resistance for the Adi people against Christianity brought to the native land by the missionaries. That is why the tribal people who received Christianity are very conscious regarding the preservation of indigenous culture. According to K. S. Singh in *People of India*, "The Christian Tribals of the state have retained many of their beliefs and customs. Besides the major Christian festivals, they celebrate many of their tribal festivals as well." (45)

In *River Poems*, Mamang Dai frequently deals with subjects that are unique and specific to her own tribe. As for example, she composed poems like "Tapu", "Songs of Dancers", "Let No Tears", "Man and Brother" where we find the traditional cultural zest of the Adi people with all its dances, ritual rites and inherent faith in Pantheism. The Arunachalee Tapu dance and folk faith associated with it is described in the poem,

"Tapu". It is a type of dance performed during the time of community fencing. Nowadays, this is viewed as a "war dance" to banish malicious spirits. This Tapu dance is performed each year on 7th March to herald the season of shifting cultivation, during the festival of Aran. The dancers put the attire of a warrior in order to drive "The Spirit of fear into the dust" (43). It is necessary for all male members of a family to go hunting and staying in the jungle for a week.

In the remotest past, there was a belief concerning this dance. It was strongly believed that childless woman could also join the dances putting on male apparel in the hope of conceiving a son (43). The dancers, performing this dance seemed to be very cognisant regarding the preservation as well as transformation of their traditional knowledge and wisdom to the next generation:

Mark the sword
Mark the sound.
What are the words we will tell?
Our sons and daughters?
That dying is not so hard
If the image survives.
When the wind is young
Sow celebration.
seize the branch of lightning,
dress the thorn wood stem
for conception. (42)

With such intense feeling and great devotion to their traditional rituals, the Adi Tribe celebrate this Aran Festival and Tapu dance is a part of that celebration.

Apart from Aran, the Adis also celebrate the Solung festival with great enthusiasm and traditional fervour. The information gathered from the official



website of Directorate of Information and Public Relations, it has been mentioned that Solung is the most popular festival of the Adi people. The highlight of the festival is performing of religious Ponung dance performed by girls of the village for many days and nights. The poem, entitled “Song of the Dancers”, is a reference to the ritual ‘ponung’ dance of the Adi tribe. The ‘ponung’ dance is performed in anticipation of good harvest and welfare of the village community. The dance performance is led by a mythical figure called Miri, who remains at the centre. The girls made a circle holding each other by stretching their hands. Every evening, the Miri sings “Solung Abung”. He through his songs narrates the stories about the origin of man, animals and plants, the ancestry of the Adis. While dancing, the girls became aware of such stories. They danced till the story unfolds the mysterious origin related to the creation of crops and some ancestral animals like mithun:

We danced so long
We broke all our bracelets
To please a fancy.
In the dark I heard all your stories,
Listened to your songs,
In empty space dreaming desire
Vivid in the sun’s embrace
Once, our eyes beheld vast lakes of fire. (19)

There is a particular story associated with this ponung dance featuring mythological, figures like Doying Bote (one of the gods residing in heaven), “Kine Nane” etc. (<https://www.eastmojo.com/arnachal-pradesh/2020/09/01/arnachal-pradesh-harvest-festival-of-adi-tribe-solung-begins/>; accessed on 3/11/2021). The

story is amorous by nature and so after hearing such stories, the girls started “dreaming desire.”

Dai not only speaks of the traditional dance forms of her tribe through her poems. She also depicts in detail the funeral rites of the Adis through the creation of poems like “Let No Tears”. In this particular poem, we come to know about the customs performed by Adi people during funeral rites. They sang a kind of dirge which is sung in impromptu verse during funeral rites. In Adi language it is called “penges”. The childhood and youth memories associated with the dead person are recalled by singing such songs:

The women will return to tell stories.
The men will sit by you, strengthening,
Strengthening ties and talking....
A mother’s gaze embracing all grief
Will kindle the chanting. (46)

Chanting here refers to the song of lamentation called “penges”. Again there is a reference to the custom of fastening beads and sacred twine to the hair and wrist of relatives of the deceased in the poem. The last stanza of the poem illustrates this custom:

When the singing rises
Death itself will cease.
Blue beads in your hair will turn you
a boy again, whirling
the wild mountains to sleep. (46)

Another peculiar aspect of Dai’s poetry is her belief concerning man – tiger kinship. This is not her single assertion. When she speaks about such kind of kinship, she becomes the mouthpiece of her state, where killing of a tiger is considered as a serious crime. The poem describes a scene, where a hunter wanted to kill a tiger. To his



surprise, the tiger calling him as brother, asks for mercy and requested him to save his life;

“The tiger runs swiftly from my father’s house
Calling my name.

Brother! Man brother!

Have mercy for our destiny!”(50)

The hunter at last decided not to kill the tiger. There may be two reasons: Fear of punishment and the ultimate realisation to value the life of his sibling, as in Arunachal, men and tiger were considered as “born brothers.” (51)

Being an ardent nature-lover, Dai is not oblivious to the changes that is apparent in Nature now a days. Her poems also reflect the agonies as nature gets destroyed due to urbanisation and other external factors. As for example ,we can refer to the poems like “ Small Town and the Rivers” “Birthplace” and “ Remembrance”. In “Small Town and the River”, Dai shows how the river laments due to the emergence of a small town out of a rural landscape. As the river bears a soul as mentioned by the poet so the poet becomes nostalgic thinking about the bygone days :

“Sometimes, I think it holds its breath

Seeking the land of fish and stars.” (29)

This poem also throws light on the environmental issues through the use of words like “dry earth”. Here the poet makes her people aware of the changing environment and the need to tackle and challenge such issues.

In “Birthplace” also, similar issues are raised. As mentioned earlier, Nature is like a kin

for local people. There was a time, when no one disturbed them in their chosen isolated landscape. But with the arrival of intruders, the people suffered from identity crisis. There is a longing for their natural setting in the melancholic tone of the poem.

In “Remembrance” the speaker depicts the changing scenario of the forest and thereby brings forth the issues concerning survival of the natives. For her it is a mistake to expect a forever stagnant mode of survival. In all these poems, Dai delineated the anxiety of the local people arising out of foreign interference.

Conclusion :

From the above discussion, we can summarise that the chosen poems from Mamang Dai’s *River Poems* depict the indigenous culture of the Adi Tribe. Mythology, Ethnicity and Pantheistic philosophy are some of the important aspects delineated through these poems and there is a conscious attempt on the part of the poet to preserve the diverse traditions of her homeland. Most of the poems included in *River Poems* reverberates the ethnic and cultural faith of the Adi community alongside mythical background. The philosophy of Donyi-Polo, practised by the Adi People governs the basic principles of their lives. This nature-based philosophy is the promoter of harmonious balance among all life forms on Earth, both living and non-living. Apart from this, Dai’s poetry also records the numerous contaminations evident in nature resulting out of man-made activities.



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