



‘Negotiating Cultural Ecology : An Ecocritical Trajectory into Mamang Dai’s Poetry’

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Abstract :

Mamang Dai has been widely acclaimed as an ethnic poet, a poet of nature and a culturally conscious poet negotiating myth and history through memory for reclaiming the ancient roots/glory and cultural past of the Adi tribe of Arunachal Pradesh. However after the publication of her *The River Poems* (2004) and *MidSummer Survival Lyrics* (2014) critical attention has been shifted from her ethnic consciousness to her eco ethnic sensibility, eco philosophy and eco mysticism in the backdrop of deforestation, desertification, loss of pastoral landscape caused by the anthropocentric attitude of the modern and postmodern man/ civilization and consumer culture. In order to overcome the grave situation Eco critics, Ecologists, and Environmentalists have been persistently insisting on preservation of forests and pastoral landscape, animals and birds for restoring a healthy ecosystem based on the principle of ‘interconnectedness’ between man and nature, between biotic and abiotic elements. Together with Deep Ecology, Romantic Ecology and Biophilia, emphasis is now laid on ‘Cultural Ecology’ which points to adaptation and negotiation of culture and ecology so as to realize what Derrida calls ‘Entanglement’ between society and the surrounding environment. In the backdrop of the above, the present paper purports to situate the eco-sensibility of Mamang Dai and the application of the concept of cultural ecology to her poetry by analysing her poems selected from the two collections- *The River Poems* and *Midsummer Survival Lyrics*.

KeyWords : *Cultural Ecology, Ecological Awareness, Ecocritical Consciousness, Interconnectedness, Adi culture, Collective consciousness.*

Introduction :

Ecological awareness and eco-critical consciousness have been a subject of serious contemplation in Postcolonial discourse for more

than half a century, and their importance has been increasingly felt in the North Eastern part of India consisting of seven sister-states. Right from Verrier Elwin’s *Myths of the Northeast Frontier of*



India (1968), *The Art and Crafts of Nagaland* (1986), Sidney Endle's *The Kachari's*, P.R.T Gurdon's *The Khasis* (2012), H.O. Mawrie's *The Khasi Milieu* (1981), K. Brahma's *Aspects of the Social Customs of the Bodos* (1989), Lyall and Stock's *The Mikirs* (1908) to Sujata Min's *Ethics and Environment ; Theory and the Adi and Khasi practice* (2001), Dharamsing Teron's *Karbi Studies* (2011), A. Neville Watts *The Half Clad Tribals of Eastern India* (1970) and L.A. Waddell's *The Tribes of the Brahmaputra Valley* (1901), scholars have thrown sufficient light on the social, political, economic and cultural aspects of the tribal people of the Northeast of India. But, very few of them have attempted ecocritical/ecological study of the writings from the Northeast. There is no denying the fact that the region is rich in biodiversity, and constitutes a mosaic of many ethnic groups/tribes with their divergent beliefs, myths, traditions, customs and practices. Whereas some of these tribes have settled down by river banks or in plain areas, there are many more living in the lap of mountains and fountains and foothills officially labelled as 'plain tribes' and 'hill tribes' respectively. Some of these tribes like Bodo, Rabha, Mishng, Dimas, Karbi, Ao Naga, Khasi and Adi have strong and inevitable connection with nature and forest ecology.

Among the eco-conscious poets of the region, the names of Mamang Dai from Arunachal Pradesh, and Tamsula Ao from Nagaland stand prominent. Tamsula Ao's *Laburnum for my Head* is a powerful plea for protection of nature and environment, and through her "Laments for the Earth", she not only brings to the fore the

anthropocentric urge of the modern man for deforestation and eco-destruction under the influence of colonialism, modernization and industrialization but also connects, from the standpoint of eco-feminism, the oppression of women with the oppression of Nature at large. Mamang Dai, a celebrated poet of Arunachal Pradesh, too searches for her cultural roots through the protection and preservation of myths and rituals, faith and customs, animistic belief in forest ecology and eco-mystical art of living in close communion with Nature. The present paper purports to situate Mamang Dai's eco-centric sensibility with special emphasis on her leaning towards cultural ecology.

Born to the Adi tribe of Arunachal Pradesh, Mamang Dai is usually acclaimed as an ethnic poet, a nature poet and an eco-conscious poet evincing engaging interest in the sights and sounds, flora and fauna, mountains and rivers, weather and climate, season and environmental condition as a whole. To situate Dai as an eco-conscious writer on the basis of her prose and poetry-*The Legends of Pensam* (2006), *Midsummer Survival Lyrics* (2014) and *River Poems* (2004) is to negotiate Deep ecology with Romantic ecology, eco-philosophy and Cultural ecology in her literary oeuvre. In *Legends of Pensam* and *Midsummer Survival Lyrics*, one locates Dai's propensity for exploring spiritual connection with nature. The basis of Dai's eco mysticism is grounded upon her celebration of life and culture of Adi tribe in terms of peaceful co-existence, sense of togetherness and harmony which is strongly reminiscent of William Wordsworth's and Thomas Hardy's glorification



of rustic simplicity, belief-system and simple/ innocent way of life with utmost naturalness. Like Wordsworth, she nourishes a pantheistic belief that peace and happiness roll through everything and that the biotic and abiotic elements in ecosystem are all bound by the spiritual principle of ‘ interconnectedness’. In this connection, Margaret Ch.Zama in her book *Emerging Literature from Northeast India*(2013) aptly observes:

‘The pantheistic nature of her poems are but natural; being a practitioner of Donyi-polo, a traditional belief of Adi tribe to which she belongs, which upholds the union of life in rocks, rivers, hills, trees and all life’. (‘Summer Hill: IAS Review, 14-1, No 2, 41)

Zama’s observation succinctly shows that Dai, like a romantic ecologist, celebrates life in terms of ‘inter connectedness’ and an inherent bond between the Adi people and nature bound by the coil of spirituality. In Dai’s eco philosophic vision, rivers sing, mountains speak; forests and fountains, water and tiger serve spiritual purpose in their own ways so that life goes on. This is the secret of eco- mysticism in her poetry, and her poem ‘Mystic Mountain’ bears true testimony to this fact. Dai’s metaphors are exclusively drawn from the world of nature, and are spiritually constructed with proto romantic zest to convey ecological contours of the landscape/environment in which Adi people do live with the bond of peaceful co-existence.

In an article under the title ‘The Nature of Faith and Worship among the Adis’, she writes that “ the great forest, mountain and the environment shaped the consciousness of the Adi

people”(2006). What Dai tends to mean here is that her ‘metaphors’ embody/signify the ‘collective consciousness’ of the people of Adi tribe in Arunachal Pradesh mixing myth and history with memory, culture and ecology/environment. ‘Mountain’ and ‘river’ are central symbols and rather extended metaphors and connect landscape with memory, history and the cultural past of the Adi people. Mountains serve as veritable vehicles through which Dai tends to reclaim her ‘ancestral root’, history and culture. Mountain is mystified as the manifestation of the Divinity, as a sure solace in calamitous hours, as friend, philosopher and guide to the Adi community as a whole. Like Keats’ ‘Ode on a Grecian Urn’, the mountain is the ‘sylvan historian’ who records the history, culture and ancestral glory of the Adis in the pages of cultural ecology. For instance, in her poem ‘Writing’, Dai candidly conveys how in the uncanny and eco phobic situation of growling thunder, appearance and disappearance of Sun, the Mountain stands as their secured shelter and Saviour. She characterizes the Adi people as simple and innocent devotees of Nature which is signified by the ‘Mountain’ :

Thunder growls,
The sun appears and disappears,
Big land
We are small, solitary silhouettes
Trying to embrace the mountain
(*Midsummer Survival Lyrics 2*)

In the poem ‘The Voice of the Mountain’ Nature is increasingly personified like Wordsworth’s beloved goddess Nature. She is the epitome of ancestral Adi rituals and culture,



and as such a simple man from the village pays a visit to the Mountain as a sacred shrine and presents a 'fish' as a part of the Adi ritual and like a divine goddess the Mountain speaks and receives the offering. The purpose of cultural ecology stands vindicated here, as the 'fish' caught from the 'river' is offered to the Mountain goddess which is a part and parcel of Adi culture. The personified Mountain speaks:

I am an old man sipping the breeze
That is forever Young.
In my life I have lived many lives.
My voice is sea waves and mountain peaks,
In the transfer of symbols
I am the desert and the rain,
The wild bird that sets in the west,
the past that recreates itself.
(*Midsummer Survival Lyrics*, 29)

Like an 'old man' laden with maturity of experience, the Mountain is the eyewitness to the smiles and tears, trials and tribulations of the Adi people which is signified by 'desert and the rain'. As the custodian of their 'history and culture', the Mountain has become a part and parcel of their collective 'cultural consciousness' and 'collective memory' through which the history of a tribe/community/race is recreated in the present: 'the past that recreates itself.' The endearing attachment between Man and Nature and between Nature and human culture can be poignantly felt through the image of an 'old man sipping the breeze'. People come and go, but the Mountain as the timeless historian records their temporal history and stands 'forever young'. The 'Mountain' is mystically conceived of as the

embodiment of eternal life (my life) which has seen and experienced many a birth and death in the world of transitoriness- 'In my life I have lived many lives' (*Midsummer Survival Lyrics*, 29)

The Mountain has become the spirit of the land and it's youthful vigour can be situated through the breeze 'that is forever young', its timeless voice can be listened to through the perennial 'sea voices' and its fathomless nature can be realised through the 'mountain peaks' Behind her art of personification, Dai brings to the fore the animistic belief of the Adi culture. Nature provides a cultural space and the landscape/environment is permeated with an air of spirituality and supernatural glow. At the same time, a conducive ecological/environmental condition revives with the wings of memory and through the spirits of trees and voices of river, sea and mountain, the ancestral roots of the Adi people. The mountain speaks a language of silence which no human language can comprehend. In the poem 'An Obscure Place', the poet is not sure of their written past, and hence nothing is certain about the 'history of our race' except the mountains :

Nothing is certain These are mountains,
Oh! These are Mountains
We climbed every slope, we slept by the river
But do not speak of Victory yet.
(*Midsummer Survival Lyrics*, 18)

The ecological message is that mountains and rivers are fathomless; they can be loved and loved only, and hence the anthropocentric question of exercising victory/hegemony over nature does not arise at all. The poet laments that under the impact of colonialism, modernization and



industrialisation, people have not only blissfully forgotten their ancestral roots and cultural heritage, but also strained the cordial relationship with rivers and mountains, wilderness and forest ecology. While subscribing to the theory of Deep Ecology, Mamang Dai rejects anthropocentrism, capitalism, consumerism and the idea of nature as ‘ free lunch’, and supports the ecocentric view- of life— love of all lives, both human and non-human and mutual interaction between two species otherwise called ‘commensalism’ and ‘mutualism’. Ecology demands love of ‘economy of Nature’ that involves total relations of human and animal world, of one animal with another animals, of birds and plants, mountains, rivers, forests and fountains.

In *Midsummer Survival Lyrics*, she strongly argues that the mountainous environment being their homeland and the land of their ancestors as well, the question of crushing the mountains or deforesting the green landscape will be an onslaught on the history, ancestral glory and culture of the Adi people. Dai comes closer to the philosophy of ‘biophilia’ (love of all forms of life) when she calls upon her people to show their love and kindness for animals, birds, worms, insects and plants as well (53). In her poem, ‘Be careful how you cut that tree’, she denounces merciless deforestation which is a major cause of eco-destruction. She is well aware of the fact that deforestation and desertification not only lead to colossal loss of the balanced eco system inviting catastrophic changes in weather and climate, but also largely affects tribal rituals and cultural practices that are mostly dependent on forest resources - trees, plants, creepers, animals and

birds. At the same time, deforestation leads to destruction of landscape and decidedly affects the economic and cultural life of the tribal people. Nature being the fountain source of beauty, pristine purity and primeval innocence, deforestation withers their aesthetic alacrity and mutilates their creative imagination and natural way of life. Dai’s insistence on ‘mutualism’ is evident in the poem ‘Man and Brother’ wherein the poet calls upon the tiger-a born brother to human being according to Tribal belief-not to be merciless to human beings. Here, it is significant to note that trees are not only near and dear to tribal people, these are also permanent shelters to animals and birds. And by the same logic, massive deforestation brings about eco-destruction to both human and animal world and therefore the animals are bound to become merciless. The poet aptly appeals to the tiger: ‘My brother Oh! My brother/ have mercy for our destiny.’ (*Midsummer Survival Lyrics*, 51)

Dai’s ecocentric and compassionate attitude towards animals is strongly reminiscent of Shakuntala’s love for deer of the hermitage in Kalidasa’s *Abhijnana Sakuntalam* and the melancholic philosopher Jaques weeping over the wounded deer in Shakespeare’s *As You Like It*. In the mouth of Jaques, Shakespeare chastises the Senior Duke for their merciless killing of deer in their own dwelling place, And in much the same way, in Kalidasa’s *Abhijnana Sakuntalam*, the king of Hastinapura (Dushyanta) is prevented from deer- hunting in the Ashram environment by the hermits which vindicates the efficacy of forest ecology. At the same time, such an ecological



stance establishes Greg Garrad's viewpoint that animal study constitutes a significant factor in ecological discourse. Dai emphasizes peaceful existence of every species/organism on the ground that Nature provides food, shelter and sustenance to one and all, and that human beings, animals, birds, and other species should live like brothers in the same landscape with the bond of love and friendship: 'it is the state of mutual regard, a state of kinship'. (*Midsummer Survival Lyrics*, 44) Dai's negotiation between biotic and abiotic elements for the preservation of landscape and forest Ecology satisfactorily comes out in the poem "Man and brother" wherein one locates a happy coexistence of both the human and animal world:

The tiger runs swiftly from my father's house

Calling my name.

Brother ! Man Brother

Have mercy for our destiny.

(*Midsummer Survival Lyrics*. 44)

Being a sensitive and qualified poet, Mamang Dai is seriously aware of the dichotomy between ecocentrism and anthropocentrism, between rural ecology and urban ecology.

This is all the more evident from her novels *Stupid Cupid* (2009) and *The Black Hill* (2014). In the former novel, the central characters Adna and Mareb leave their native rural landscape in search of freedom In the urban landscape of Delhi their dream remains unfulfilled and the novelist reclaims, through their unfulfilled dream, the efficacy of rural ecology and the ineffable bond of naturalness with Nature in contrast to the complex and busy life in the metropolis. In much the same way, her recent novel *The Black Hill*, with a mid

Nineteenth Century setting, draws a telling contrast between the pristine purity of Nature and the complexity / artificiality of the globalised and industrialised civilization epitomized by colonial forces. The intrusion of the East India company into the serene landscape of the Mishmee and Abor tribes of Mebo is stoutly opposed by the natives of the tribal villages, which vindicates Dai's powerful plea for protection of tribal culture and pure natural landscape from the onslaught of anthropocentric political and religious forces of colonization / modernization. The brave young man Kajinsha's desperate efforts to unite the tribal people against the British, reminiscent of Caliban's fight for freedom from the clutches of Prospero, the colonizer, is a brilliant historical representation of the native- tribal psychology for preservation of their territory and culture, *The Black Hill* symbolizes the tribal people/culture as against the aggrandizing ego of the 'white man'.

As a representative of the Adi community, Dai is essentially a poet of ethnic culture, and through her *River poems*, more predominantly through the central metaphors of 'river' and 'mountain', she tries tenaciously to reclaim, with the help of myth, memory and history, the ancestral glory and the glorious cultural past. With her characteristic romantic melancholy, she realizes that life is not a blissful pastoral idyll, and that her people are no dreamers ("No Dreamers"). They are rather 'foragers for a Destiny' ("Remembrance"). They do experience a painful reality and more often than not foresee an uncertain future in a mysterious universe under the dictates of an inscrutable destiny, while lifting their



eyes to the ‘invincible sky’. Yet, they love their land /landscape, ecology and culture – their rites and rituals, Popir dance and rhythmic presentation of ‘Phoning’ dance, and above all their practice of ‘Doni- polo’ which upholds a sacred traditional belief in the continuity of life in both biotic and abiotic forms of life.

Like the Mountain discussed above, Dai’s River is also increasingly personified, and the river embodies at once the myth, memory, history and culture of the people of Arunachal Pradesh in general, and of Adi community in particular. Like Langston Hughes’ famous poem ‘The Negro Speaks of the Rivers’, Dai speaks of a culturally conscious river- historian- ‘The river has a soul’. In the poem ‘Small Towns and the Rivers’, the poet adumbrates how the river’s soul coexists with human anxiety and despair of the innocent tribal people. Yet, nature and culture are intertwined, as the innocent tribals surrender to ‘river’ and ‘mountain’ with immaculate love and endearing attachment: ‘In small towns by the river / We all want to walk with gods’ (River Poems, 2004, lines 39-40). In the poem ‘Floating Island’, the poet makes a spiritually blessed big person (Virata Purusha) out of the Mountain that stretches down into the water of the river. The Mountain speaks and calls upon the inhabitants of foothills to take rest in Him: ‘Dear one, do not go away / Rest, on my shoulder’ (lines 4/5) It is in the lap of the mountain that a woman is found asleep ‘pressing her cheek on my pillow’ (lines 6-8) and ‘vivid with dreams’, whereas the ‘birds of summer are resting in her breast’ (lines 9-10). Dai’s art of naturalness in depicting the inviolable man-nature relationship

is strikingly notable indeed. Even as romantics like Rousseau and Wordsworth were averse to nature-culture relationship in the aftermath of the Enlightenment and Industrial Revolution, the relationship between nature and Culture of the tribal people stands incontrovertible.

The French philosopher Derrida tends to argue that the coexistence of Nature and Culture leads to a sound ecosystem, and separation of culture from nature leads to a deconstructive ecosystem. In his *Of Grammatology* (chapter titled ‘The End of The Book and the Beginning of Writing’), Derrida draws reference to Rousseau and hails Nature in high esteem by extolling her as the ‘great and sublime book’ (*Of Grammatology*, 18). Derrida further maintains that an ecocritical text should not show differentiation between nature and culture, and that it should emphasize nature culture ‘Entanglement’ without the imposition of the controversial questions of ‘hegemony’ and ‘subordination’. Viewed from a judicious ecocritical perspective, neither Nature nor Culture should dominate or think itself as superior or inferior. Both Nature and Culture should be bound by the bond of ‘Entanglement’ or ‘interwovenness’ so that the binary between ecocentrism and anthropocentrism will be dissolved for establishment of a sound ecosystem.

‘Cultural ecology’ is adaptation of culture to a specific environment and it was developed by Julian Steward (1955) in the 20th century. The concept is grounded upon the amicable affinity between Nature and human culture with a benevolent purpose and eco-human communion. Cultural ecology intends to realize a harmonious



relationship between society and the surrounding natural environment on the basis of ecological ethics or what Derrida calls ‘entanglement ‘ or ‘interconnectedness’. What is required therefore is a sound ecological thinking and ecological culture by setting aside the detrimental attitude of ‘dominance ‘ and ‘ subordination’. Like Environmental ethics, Cultural ecology necessitates ecological education and ecological upbringing to develop the idea of ecological culture. Here, one is reminded of Barry Commoner’s recommendation of ‘Four Laws of Ecology ‘ to curb anthropocentrism

as developed in his book *The Closing Circle: Nature, Man and Technology* (1971:29-42). Commoner’s emphasis on interconnectedness, nature as the reservoir of knowledge and as the greatest teacher, and non – interference of the human world in ecosystem by rejecting the idea of taking natural resources as ‘free-lunch’ are some of the cardinal ecological lessons that can be satisfactorily negotiated in Mamang Dai’s *River Poems and Midsummer Survival Lyrics* so as to vindicate the relevance of cultural ecology in the 21st Century.

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