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### The Voices Of The Rivers And Mountains Of The Northeast: An Ecocritical Reading Of Mamang Dai's Poems

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**Abstract:**

Poetry from Northeast India has multifaceted voices. Their poems portray the land through many images of rivers, trees, hills, tradition, culture, myth, and legends. The poems from the northeast also deal with an array of themes from geography to politics, myths and legends to ecology, insurgencies and militancy to peace and harmony. The Northeastern poets stand as representatives of their entire community, and their poems are not singular but the voices of the region's inhabitants. A significant characteristic of northeastern poetry is its concern with ecology. Search for identity and a sense of estrangement are also prevailing features of the current political condition in the northeast. There is a huge myth about the writings from the northeast as merely conflict literature. It comes to light only when one takes up a closer reading of the works from this region because the writers of this region explore a romantic and mythopoetic vision of their vernacular counterparts of both past and present. The common bond of poetic sensibility is predominated by love for the land, nature, myths, and narrative tribal folklore. This paper aims to show how poems of this region consciously employ ecology as a means for an assertion of northeastern identity.

**Keywords:** ecology, insurgency, myth, identity crisis, insurgency, turmoil, urbanization, mythopoetic, animism.

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**Introduction**

Poetry from Northeast India has multifaceted voices. The Northeastern poets stand as representatives of their entire community, and their poems are not singular, but they are voices of the inhabitants of the region. Outsiders picture the northeast as a land of beauty and look at it with an exploring eye, but ironically the miseries faced by the dwellers are camouflaged with its landscape. Their poems portray the land through a wide range of images of rivers, trees, hills, tradition, culture, myth, and legends. The poems from the northeast also deal with an array of themes from geography to politics, myths and legends to ecology, insurgencies and militancy to peace and harmony. The dynamism and vitality of oral folklore

continue predominantly through modern narratives that have paved their way through the northeast. Both the ancient and the modern narratives of the region are present simultaneously. A significant characteristic of northeastern poetry is its concern with ecology. Search for identity and a sense of estrangement are also prevailing features of the current political condition in the northeast. The poems of this region consciously employ ecology as a means for an assertion of identity.

Ecology plays a vital role in providing a common ground to the poets from this region. It helps to bind them together, and it can be seen in the overwhelming presence of nature in almost all their works, sometimes imaginatively, sometimes romantically, but most of the time consciously. A reading of contemporary poetry in English from Northeast India makes one feel that there has been a conscious use of ecology in their works. It seems to play a pivotal role in their search for identity, traditional values, and culture, which they feel is lost in the monotonous life of modernization and urbanization. Their works also reflect their grave concerns about various environmental issues such as large-scale deforestation, coal and uranium mining, ethnic violence, insurgency, and counter-insurgency operations — all of which ultimately lead to ecology degradation. Their poetry strongly advocates the preservation of the region's ecology as they believe it would be the way of preserving their land, their native tradition and culture, and above all, their identity.

Northeast poetry deals with the psychological and social difficulties of modern life and living. It seems concerned with the subjective realities and predicament of their people and humankind in general. The eight states of the region, although there has been marked a common tendency to club them under one tag, the 'Northeast', hugely vary in tradition, culture, language, and religion. So, it would be a grave injustice, especially in any academic discourse, to homogenize poetry, or any literary genre, from this region — a land inhabited by an assorted conglomeration of peoples with a *mélange* of traditions, cultures, languages, and religions. However, despite this diversity, it is possible to locate some common grounds, shared values, and concerns of these writers. Besides several issues like an identity crisis, search for roots, or the contemporary socio-political atmosphere of the region, it is the ecology of the region and an ecological concern that predominantly seem to unite these multiethnic writers in a common platform.

There is a huge myth about the writings from the northeast as merely conflict literature. It comes to light only when one takes up a closer reading of the works from this region because the writers of this region explore a romantic and mythopoetic vision of their vernacular counterparts of both past and present. The common bond of poetic sensibility is predominated by love for the land, nature, myths, and narrative tribal folklore. The universal coherence of these poets gets reflected in their love for the land and the love of humanity, which coalesce into surreal images. Their poetry's interactive nature helps form an integrated, committed, and conscious discourse on the present times. Rooted and autobiographical, these poets are also not particularly concerned with technique, form, and symmetry; they are not remarkable experimenters with meter or craft. It has been noted that contemporary verse from the Northeast subverts all compartmentalized definitions of rootedness and rootlessness. Often lacking the linguistic sophistication of the metropolitan poets, perhaps the fluid nature of diversity in this body of work renders it impossible to form the canon. Further, these poets create a 'mythopoesis' that acknowledges individual creativity as a living experience.

The poets from this region show ecological concerns in their poetry. Insurgency, identity crisis, and a sense of alienation from the mainland are some of the dominant issues of the contemporary politics of Northeast India, and these themes have a resonance in the contemporary poetical works of the Arunachalee poets. There has been an urge to go back to their roots through their native culture and

tradition. The ecology of the region has been consciously used by the poets as a means also for asserting identity of their own.

Mamang Dai reveals life in Arunachal Pradesh, its natural beauty, tradition and culture of different local tribes, tribal myths and legends in her poems. She is proud of the rich heritage of her land. She believes that only it can save the tribal communities from the humdrum of modernization and urbanization under the burden of which their ancient faith and identity seem to fade away gradually. In her poetry, life in Arunachal Pradesh, people's faith and her own, agriculture, mountains, streams, rivers and stones, myths, and nature's magic reveal a myriad world of Arunachal's ecology and mysterious and glorious heritage. She reflects the Arunachalee culture and tradition and recent or modern transitions in the mosaic of living conditions. As a keen heritage explorer, Mamang Dai seems to be a sentinel of traditional tribal values. Environment, profound serenity in nature and an innocent voice about the things in the surroundings have been her essential concerns. She voices her emotions and feelings through the images and metaphors chosen chiefly from nature. Her search for identity has exposed her to being a nature-loving humanist. She reveals her beliefs in the tribal pantheon of God and the mystery of environmental ecology. (Das 96)

Mamang Dai's poems landscape the past and the present with recurrent images embedded in nature. They are not just an impassive witness to the existential despair of men and women but a living presence for small-scale commotions. Mamang Dai and her philosophy of animism is reflected in the poem *Green in the Time of Flood*

“Time is a miracle where the colour green is wrapped

in the stillness of waiting

like the birth of days before time,

and every night the rain cloud descends,

yet the meaning of words is dancing before our eyes

in the mysterious fire of a single flame

lit from the fire of your hands” (Dai 18)

The philosophy of animism at large contains both the observed or physical world and the unseen or spirit world without any sharp distinction between the two realities; what happens in one affects the other. The earth plays a prominent role because it is viewed as a living entity and Mamang Dai's verse resonates with the ecofeminist trends of contemporary times; though her characters have bodily connections with nature, this is not the Euro-centric association between women's bodies and a degraded nature; it is instead a reconfiguring of nature, bodies, and the relationship between humans and the natural world.

In Mamang Dai's *Small Towns and The River*, the 'river' becomes a metaphor for life. The river is the life – force, an eternal entity that bestows an identity on the people around it.

The river has a soul.

In the summer it cuts through the land

like a torrent of grief. Sometimes,

sometimes, I think it holds its breath

seeking a land of fish and stars

The river has a soul. (Dai 29)

To say that a river has a soul is to believe that it has a will of its own. Therefore, it cuts through the land, it holds its breath, and it seeks a land of fish and stars as though the river is acting on its own volition. This is not to say that the river cannot be used as an instance of personification. Imagined in terms of human characteristics, the river is said to hold its breath. However, to explicitly iterate that, 'The river has a soul' sounds more like a statement of belief than an instance of personification. Besides, rivers and not humans cut through the land.

In one of Dai's poems entitled *The Missing Link* she says:

"The river was the green and white vein of own lives

linking new terrain,

in a lust for land brother and brother

claiming the sunrise and the sunset,

in a dispute settled by the rocks

engraved in a vanished land." (Dai 11)

Thus 'river' is a recurring image in Dai's poetry.

When Dai speaks of the 'spirit of place,' she echoes an essential belief of the traditional belief system of this region of the world. In the traditional belief system, the natural world is alive with spirits. A house, a field, or a river has a soul. One cannot simply own land or dispose of it. One must perform certain rituals in order to propitiate the spirit of the land so that the soul of the owner may become one with the spirit of the land.

The opening line immediately sets the tone of the poem *Small Towns and the River*: 'Small towns always remind me of death.' The voice of anxiety established in the opening line is reinforced in the second stanza by the actual death of someone. It is interesting to note that the poet is not related to the person who died, yet 'In the dreadful silence we wept'. The occasion is emotional enough to remind the speaker of the human condition: life and death. If human life is defined by temporality, rituals are characterised by permanence, and so is the river. 'The river' may be a synecdoche extension representing the natural world. Therefore, the impermanence of human life is juxtaposed against the permanence of traditions and nature, the idea powerfully conveyed by the line, 'In the summer it cuts through the land / like a torrent of grief.'

The way in which rivers cut through the land – human habitat – is compared to 'a torrent of grief.' In what may be seen as the central stanza of the poem, the image of happy childhood days, the anxiety of small towns and traditional belief in death are all put together in a stanza like a collage. The medley of disconnected ideas seems to suggest the difficulty of identifying the source of anxiety. This anxiety seems to entail not only the loss of childhood memories but is also compounded by the gradual disappearance of traditions.

The next stanza reinstates a sense of calm contentment, “In the cool bamboo, / restored in sunlight/life matters, like this,” which is reaffirmed by the speaker’s assumption of collective voice, “We all want to walk with the gods.” The speaker is reaffirming their desire to live in the traditional ways of life. Mamang Dai’s poems often conclude with an optimistic note by suggesting that the restorative power lies in a meaningful relationship with the traditional beliefs, and the literature of the Northeast is about the language of hope.

Like the Rivers, the Hills are also significant images to the Northeastern writers. TemsulaAo, Mona Zote, Robin Ngangom and YD Thongchi find it natural to write about mountains with their glory and pristine sublimity. The mountain is not merely another memory of childhood and youth but forms part of a continuing relationship with the environment. The insularity of the northeastern states is also related to the terrain in which hills and mountains constitute a formidable barrier. The ‘mainland versus hinterland’ debate also follows from the ‘so-called distance’ in terms of miles and milestones. The Northeast has been unique in how it has administered itself over the years. The name Arunachal Pradesh itself represents the Sanskrit meaning of ‘The Land of the Dawn Lit Mountains’ as this state receives the first rays of the sun in the country. Hence, little surprise that the mountains form the storylines of many a narrative here.

Arunachal is a land of great beauty with soft snow-covered peaks, which on melting, tumble into noisy streams and rivers. In fact, the state has the honour of being one of the greenest parts of the country (Dai, Oral Narratives, 1). In an article on Arunachal Pradesh, Dai says that Arunachal is still one of the ‘last frontiers of the world’ where indigenous faith and practices still survive in an almost original form as handed down by ancestors. It is, however, equally valid that, because of the remoteness and historical isolation of this ‘forgotten land’, there is little dissemination of information about the goings on in the state (Dai 11). There are several tribes in Arunachal Pradesh, and they follow an indigenous lifestyle. Their beliefs in nature are powerful, and by that corollary, they become champions of the environment. Sacred forests, birds and beasts form part of their collective consciousness. The highest mountain peak in the Aka, a tribal inhabited area called Wojophu, is considered a sacred mountain. Removing any resources from there and even hunting is strictly prohibited. Akas believe that breaking such taboos will lead to bleeding from the nose and mouth, finally leading to death. That is why till today, this mountain is covered with dense forest (Chaudhari5).

In *An Obscure Place*, the mountains provide a kaleidoscopic view of the area. The prayers of the people pass on the slopes of the mountains. There are cloud formations which appear to be chasing ants. In the patterns of the clouds and the writer's imagination, there is a tussle between the ants and the wild cat. The mountains know all the deep secrets; they know that the ‘hornbill’ - a magnificent bird has been buried in her ‘maternal sleep’.

If a stranger passes this way

Let him look up to the sky.

A smoke cloud chases the ants,

See! They have slain the wild cat

and buried the hornbill in her maternal sleep.

The mountains are omniscient, and they know the past, the present and the future. The words of strangers lead the people into a deep mist, over grassy slopes where ancestors’ bones lie buried amidst great beauty.

Dai says that the people of the area climbed every slope, and they spent their nights by the river. The hope was to find a new home, but victory is a long drawn thought. The mountain thus not only embodies the collective consciousness of hope of people but also embodies the fears and lost expectations in an increasingly complicated and changing society. In order to add an emphasis Dai uses a refrain in this poem

There are mountains. Oh! There are mountains.

We climbed every slope. We slept by the river.

But do not speak of victory yet.

Mamang Dai says that the history of the people of Arunachal Pradesh is an oral one and it is full of stories and myths. There is an uncertainty about the origins of the language. She ends the first stanza of *An Obscure Place* with words of doubt, "Nothing is certain". However, there is a certainty of the mountain. "There are mountains. Oh! There are mountains". She uses the pronoun we and exclaims that they knew each and every corner of the mountain. There are several myths related to the mountains in tribal folklore and like the other aspects of nature, their glorification is related to their invincibility and their emanation of life. The intrinsic relationship between nature and human beings is primordial and has given birth to animistic practices and nature worship.

In *An Obscure Place* Dai throws in a feeling of doubt:

The words of strangers have led us into a mist

deeper than the one we left behind-

weeping, like the waving grassland

where the bones of our fathers are buried

surrounded by thoughts of beauty.

Who are these strangers? Are they the outsiders who infest the North- East with their alibi of livelihood and trade or are they the armed forces who push their way into the heartland? Dai is pained over them being pushed into the morass, and thus even being dislodged from their traditional environments. Apart from the politics of the matter, the predicament of the northeastern states vis-a-vis the so called 'outsiders' is a reality that surfaces time and again.

In *The Voice of the Mountain*, Dai says that the mountain can identify with the desert and the rain. It is also the bird that sits in the west. The past is recreated by the mountains. The mountain tells us of 'life with particles of life that clutch and cling for thousands of years'. Mountains represent life forms and contribute to a churning of life of 'thousands of years'.

I am the desert and the rain.

The wild bird that sits in the west.

The past that recreates itself

and particles of life that clutch and cling

For thousands of years –

I know, I know these things

as rocks know, burning in the sun's embrace,

about clouds, and sudden rain;

as I know a cloud is a cloud is a cloud,

A cloud is this uncertain pulse

that sits over my heart.(Dai)

The mountains know the rocks that shine in the sun. The mountains know the clouds intimately and have a clear inkling of the impending rain. The relationship between the mountain and the cloud is intrinsic. The clouds by shedding their moisture on the mountains share a symbiotic relationship with this landform. The mountain calls the cloud 'this uncertain pulse that sits over its heart'. The cloud may fall anytime but only with the connivance of the mountain.

The geographical concepts of mountains acting as rain shadow and rain shedding natural structures are interlinked with the philosophy of the hill tribes. The tribes through their traditional knowledge and experience understand the linkages between mountains and rains. Their belief systems are intrinsically entwined with nature and its preservation, and their lifestyles replicates the traditional practices.

In *Voice of the Mountain*, Dai speaks like an omnipresent voice, travelling the river, the towns, and the estuary mouth. Dai says that the mountain is like an old man sipping the breeze that is 'forever young'. She says that nature is like an old man who has lived many lives. His voice is like sea waves and mountain peaks. Nature transfers symbols and is a 'chance syllable that orders the world with history and miracles'. In the poem, the mountain narrates the story of its omnipresence. The opening lines, 'from where I sit on the high platform, I can see the ferry lights crossing, crisscrossing the big river'. The mountain claims to be all-knowing. It sees the towns, the estuary mouth, and the bank of the river. The mountains are so ancient that they can 'outline the chapters of the world'.

There is a sorrow too related to the mountains as they stand mute witnesses to the pain of an indigenous people. Despite all the slopes that have been climbed and all the familiarity with the terrain, the people cannot talk of victory yet. Why is victory elusive? The mountain takes on different forms throughout the poem and sees all that takes place in a fickle-minded universe. It is a silent witness to all the activities of human beings, the birds and the beasts and even various landforms. The mountain remains an omnipresent leitmotif throughout the poem.

The mountain is like an oracle, telling stories of change and yet bearing the nature of permanence. In the end of the poem *The Voice of the Mountain*, the mountain knows that the universe gives nothing but an appearance of being permanent. 'Peace is a falsity', the mountain remarks. The last line of the poem is significant as it is a resonance of the conditions of the world. Regimes may change and the dream of a true homeland maybe fulfilled, but peace ever eludes. The existence of truth is an existential reality, but

behind it is the turmoil and dissatisfaction of a nation. Several movements for peace over the ages have achieved peace on the ashes of violence and bloody wars. History is a mere spectator to these violent revolutions and the innocence of peace has often been cloaked in the guilt of blood.

In the poem, *Small Towns and the River* too Mamang Dai talks of the presence of the mountain even though the dominant theme is the river. The river knows the immortality of water as it sees the first drop of rain on the thirsty earth and then the same water rising as a mist on the mountain tops. The mountain is shrouded in mystery and as it is covered in mist it gets a uniqueness of distance and enigma. Much like the invisibility of the northeastern states from the national radar, even the lofty mountains of Arunachal remain hidden in mystery from the so-called mainland. The mountain as a metaphor for the mysterious, the unknown and the mighty can also be seen as representative of the resilient, the steadfast and the powerful.

The mountain speaks in different tones, sometimes as a young man and at other times as a senior citizen. The mountain recalls how a young man came from the village with a gift of fish from the river. For the mountain such an act is a repetitive one and it has seen such offerings in the past. The mountain then changes into a warrior or a hunter and leaves its spear leaning by the tree in order to 'try to make a sign'. Since the language the mountain speaks keeps changing with time, the etching with the spear is an effort at recording a truth that the mountain is aware of.

"We live in territories forever ancient and new/and as we speak in changing languages/I, also, leave my spear leaning by the tree/and try to make a sign." (Dai, *Poetry International*)

The victory that the mountain experiences, is a victory that has come after a long-drawn battle. Victory cannot be spoken of prematurely. The warrior has returned with the blood of peonies. Dai is probably talking of the sun that has set.

"I am the child who died at the edge of the world/ the distance between  
end and hope/the star diagram that fell from the sky"

In the same poem, the poet announces that small towns always remind her of death and even though her hometown is ensconced in the trees, it has certain immutability, both in summer and in winter. She even finds that life and death too are transient and the only thing that is permanent are the rituals. Like the immutability of the mountains, ritualistic practices never die.

"Just the other day someone died. /In the dreadful silence we were looking at the sad wreath of tuber rose/Life and death, life and death/only the rituals are permanent"

The mountain has in its recesses, memories of the sun rising and setting behind it. The sun is referred to as a child who died at the edge of the world but who will bring hope again when it rises in the east. It is also like a shooting star that has fallen from the sky. It is a summer that has brought doom to people probably because of the heat and the scanty rainfall. The mountain knows it all and is a silent witness. The mountain has also been beautifully compared to 'a woman lost in translation' and who still survives with the ability to be happy and carry on. The woman and the mountain are both symbolic of being lost in the quagmire of time.



Northeast poetry is a symphony of narratives, songs, folklore, myths and nuanced storytelling that wishes to transcend its expiatory aspects. As has often been pointed out, oral poetry is a way people transmit their culture, law, tradition, ceremonies, generation after generation; the purpose of poetry is not so much representation as the earnest endeavour of producing an effect, which is at the same time aesthetic and emotional. In fact, it is important to question the ‘wooly aesthetics’ of the arm-chair poets and critics studied under the canon of Indian Poetry in English.

Reading poetry from the Northeast is but a moment of confronting paradoxes and yet focusing on the melody that is ever-present as conflict of the conscience. The complexities of multiculturalism and cultural diversity, particularly in societies with both indigenous and immigrant communities (also illegal immigrants in the recent decades), require cultural policies to check any form of hegemony in the realm of literary expressions. A challenge to both the domiciled and the poet living outside the region lies in the fact that while lying at the heart of a community’s identity and cultural heritage, they are representing phenomena that are constantly recreated and studied in retrospect, as poets and artists also bring innovative perspectives to their work. Therefore, traditional creativity is marked by a dynamic interplay between collective and individual creativity and it is significant to locate this dynamic within the parameter of academics too. A genre of immense potential, the myth and folk visions of poetry from the Northeast are ever-changing, and will evolve its alternative vistas further, in the years to come.

Thus, these poets are always trying to recapture nature in their poetry. This consists of the mosaic of myths and legends, rituals and dances, festivals and cultures, traditions and people that make their poetry dense with meaning. Nature images and metaphors derived from this mosaic give their poetry a sense of rootedness and belonging for they go back into the past to emerge better able to understand their present. Intimately interwoven into their poetry is this sense of history that is animated by their deep interest in their own myths and legends. These are the other realities that they are bent upon preserving through their poetry. One sees that these poets are also conscious of themselves as being the interpreters of the natural landscapes of their homeland whose poetry captures the essential beauty of the land when that beauty is almost on the brink of being wiped out.

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