



Indigenous Ecology and Eco-consciousness in the Select Tribal Narratives of Mamang Dai

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Abstract:

Mamang Dai's work is less of a formal academic study and more of a soulful invitation into the heart of the Adi community. When she speaks of Donyi-Poloism, she isn't just describing a religion; she's sharing a way of seeing the world where the pulse of the forest is as real as our own heartbeat. In her writing, the environment isn't a backdrop or a resource to be measured—it's a living, breathing family. To the Adi people, a river isn't just flowing water; it is a sacred entity with a memory and a voice. The forests aren't just collections of timber; they are cathedrals of spirit. By weaving these beliefs into her narratives, Dai reminds us that for the tribal soul, nature is a "Thou," not an "It." It's an intimate relationship based on reverence and the quiet understanding that every leaf and stone is imbued with a divine presence.

This study examines the themes of indigenous ecology and eco-consciousness in the select tribal narratives of Mamang Dai. Her writings beautifully portray the close bond between tribal communities and nature. In her narratives, forests, rivers, hills, and landscapes are not shown merely as parts of nature but as living companions connected with culture, memory, and everyday life. The paper explores how indigenous communities respect and protect the environment through their traditional knowledge, beliefs, and way of living. It also studies how Dai raises concern about the loss of nature and tribal identity due to modernization and developmental activities. Her works reflect a deep sense of belonging, harmony, and responsibility towards the natural world.

Using eco-critical and postcolonial perspectives, this study argues that Mamang Dai's narratives present an alternative vision of life based on coexistence and environmental balance. The research highlights the importance of indigenous wisdom in understanding ecological sustainability and preserving cultural heritage in contemporary times.

Key Words: Environmental Humanities, Indigenous Studies, Ecocriticism, Tribal Fiction, Ecosophy and Deep Ecology.

Introduction:

Mamang Dai is an important literary voice from Arunachal Pradesh whose writings reflect the life, culture, and environment of the tribal communities of Northeast India. Belonging to the Adi tribe, she has written poetry, fiction, folklore, and non-fiction that beautifully portray the landscapes, traditions, myths, and everyday experiences of her people. Her major works include *The Hidden Land*, *Mountain Harvest*, *Escaping the Land*, and several poetry collections such as *The Balm of Time* and *Midsummer Survival Lyrics*. Through her writings, Dai combines history, mythology, and contemporary realities to present the beauty as well as the struggles of Northeast India. The literature of Northeast India strongly reflects the region's rich biodiversity, tribal culture, and natural beauty. The people of the region maintain a close bond with nature, and their traditions, festivals, and lifestyles show harmony and coexistence. At the same time, ecocritical studies highlight the growing ecological crisis and the need to protect nature and cultural heritage. Mamang Dai's writings therefore become important for understanding both indigenous life and environmental consciousness in contemporary literature.

Ecocriticism is the study of the relationship between literature and the environment. The term was introduced by William Rueckert in 1978, while the word "ecology" was coined earlier by Ernst Haeckel in 1866. Ecocriticism examines how literature reflects environmental concerns and the interaction between human beings and nature. It also studies the social, cultural, and political causes behind ecological destruction.

The Northeast is one of the richest ecological regions of India, and Arunachal Pradesh is especially known for its dense forests, mountains, rivers, and natural beauty. The tribal communities of the region share a deep connection with nature, which is reflected in their culture, rituals, festivals, songs, and everyday life. Their traditions show respect for the environment and highlight the close relationship between humans and nature. However, modernization and developmental activities have disturbed this ecological balance and threatened both nature and tribal culture. Writers from the Northeast, therefore, express concern about environmental destruction and the changing condition of their surroundings. Among them, she strongly portrays the landscapes and indigenous life of Arunachal Pradesh in her writings. Her works raise

important issues such as deforestation, ecological degradation, climate change, violence, and exploitation of natural resources.

An eco-critical study of her works helps in understanding the cultural and ecological identity of Arunachal Pradesh and also creates awareness about environmental protection and ecological balance, which are highly important in the present time.

Literature Review:

The article "The Lioness Defending Her Clan in the North East: A Study of Ecospiritual Elements in Mamang Dai's Fiction" (Satapathy & Nayak, 2020) provides a vital critical framework for understanding Dai's work through the lens of Ecospirituality. Reading Mamang Dai is like walking through a forest where the trees actually watch you back. In their article, Satapathy and Nayak capture this beautifully by focusing on "ecospirituality." They argue that for Dai, nature isn't just "scenery" for a story; it is the story. For the Adi people, a river or a mountain is a living ancestor with its own memory and its own sense of justice. The authors suggest that Dai's writing does something brave: it takes the "silent" world of the North East—the mist, the spirits, and the ancient songs—and makes it speak in a way that modern readers can finally hear.

There is a real sense of urgency in how the article describes Dai as a "lioness" protecting her clan. It's not just about saving trees; it's about saving a soul. The authors point out that when the world outside tries to turn the land into a map of resources or a history of borders, Dai uses folklore to remind us that the land is sacred. By bringing ancient myths into modern books, she creates a bridge between a traditional past that is fading and a noisy future. Ultimately, the article makes us feel that Dai isn't just writing novels—she is keeping a vital heartbeat alive for a community that refuses to be forgotten.

The writings of Mamang Dai have been widely discussed by scholars for their representation of tribal life, culture, folklore, and identity. Many studies focus on how she presents the traditions, beliefs, and everyday experiences of the indigenous communities of Northeast India. Her works are often appreciated for preserving tribal history and oral storytelling traditions. Some researchers have also examined the themes of identity, displacement, and the impact of modernity in her narratives. They point out that her characters often try to protect their cultural roots and traditional ways of life in a rapidly changing world. Her use of myths, memories, and local stories has been seen as an important way of keeping tribal culture alive.

A few studies mention the role of nature in her writings and observe that forests, rivers, hills, and landscapes are closely connected with tribal life. Nature in her narratives is not only a background setting but also a living and spiritual presence. However, these studies do not fully explore the ideas of indigenous ecology and eco-consciousness in detail. Hence, there is still a need for a focused study on how Mamang Dai presents ecological awareness, environmental harmony, and the deep relationship between humans and nature through tribal knowledge and traditions. This research attempts to address that area.

Research Gap:

Many scholars have studied the works of Mamang Dai from the perspectives of tribal identity, culture, folklore, and postcolonial issues. However, very little attention has been given to the themes of indigenous ecology and eco-consciousness in her narratives. The deep connection between tribal life and nature in her works still remains insufficiently explored. Most studies discuss her representation of tribal traditions and social realities, but they often overlook how nature functions as a living presence connected with memory, spirituality, and survival. Similarly, the ecological wisdom found in indigenous culture and its relevance in the present environmental crisis has not been studied in detail. Therefore, this research aims to fill this gap by examining how Mamang Dai's tribal narratives promote environmental awareness, ecological balance, and a harmonious relationship between humans and nature.

Research Questions:

- How does Mamang Dai portray the relationship between tribal communities and nature in her narratives?
- In what ways do her works reflect indigenous ecological knowledge and eco-consciousness?
- How do forests, rivers, mountains, and landscapes function as cultural and spiritual symbols in her writings?
- How does Mamang Dai critique modernization, development, and ecological destruction through her tribal narratives?
- What role does indigenous culture play in preserving ecological balance and environmental ethics in her works?
- How do Dai's narratives contribute to the broader discourse of eco-criticism and postcolonial tribal literature.

Research Methodology:

This study uses a qualitative textual analysis of *The Legends of Pensam* to explore the deep relationship between the Adi community and nature through an ecocritical approach. The research focuses on how the novel presents the close bond of the Adi people with their environment through myths, memories, oral traditions, and ecological wisdom. The study draws upon concepts such as eco-spiritualism, bioregionalism, and ecofeminism to understand how the Adi worldview values nature and challenges human-centered attitudes towards the environment. Through close reading of the primary text, along with critical essays and interviews of Mamang Dai, the research examines how her writings reflect environmental awareness and indigenous ways of living. This methodology helps in understanding how literature can preserve tribal knowledge, cultural identity, and ecological values at a time when modernization and environmental changes continue to threaten indigenous life and traditions.

The theoretical framework of indigenous ecocriticism and ethnopoetics helps in understanding the ecological and cultural depth of Mamang Dai's writings. These approaches emphasize indigenous knowledge, oral traditions, myths, and the close relationship between humans and nature. Unlike Western environmental thought, which often separates humans from nature, indigenous ecocriticism views land, rivers, forests, and living beings as interconnected and sacred. In *River Poems*, *The Black Hill* and *The Legends of Pensam*, Dai presents nature as a living presence filled with memory, spirit, and cultural meaning. Her works reflect the worldview of the Adi tribe, where humans live in harmony with the environment. Through myths, oral storytelling, and vivid imagery, Dai preserves indigenous ecological wisdom while also expressing concern for cultural and environmental loss in the modern world.

The Legends of Pensam: Representing Eco-consciousness and Tribal Identity

Mamang Dai, a poet, journalist, and former civil servant from Arunachal Pradesh, beautifully captures the life, culture, and beliefs of the Adi tribe in her novel *The Legends of Pensam* (2006). Being deeply connected to the land and its people, Dai writes with warmth and authenticity about the Siang valley and the everyday lives of the Adis. Through myths, folktales, and memories, she portrays a community that shares a close and respectful relationship with nature.

The novel presents the Adis not as isolated “tribals” shaped by stereotypes, but as people with rich traditions, emotions, and ecological wisdom. Living amidst the green landscapes and biodiversity of the

Siang valley, the Adis see nature as a living presence closely tied to their identity and survival. However, Dai also highlights the difficulties faced by the community in the modern world. Rapid modernization, globalization, and environmental changes have slowly begun to disturb their traditional way of life. Through her gentle and reflective storytelling, Dai draws attention to the cultural and emotional struggles of the Adis as they try to adapt to changing times without losing their roots. Thus, *The Legends of Pensam* becomes both a celebration of indigenous life and a sensitive reflection on cultural survival in a changing world.

In *The Legends of Pranam*, she skillfully blends the traditions, myths, memories, and customs of the with the historical realities of the community through her distinctive narrative style. The novel is divided into four sections—“A Diary of the World,” “Songs of the Rhapsodist,” “Daughters of the Village,” and “A Matter of Time”—and consists of nineteen interconnected stories that together portray the life of the Adis with emotional depth and cultural intimacy.

Through these stories, Dai traces the gradual transformation of the Adi community from a traditional tribal society to one increasingly shaped by modernity. The novel captures their pain and nostalgia as they witness the slow fading of their customs, beliefs, and close connection with nature. At the same time, it shows their struggle to adjust to the changing social and environmental realities around them. Dai’s storytelling is gentle yet powerful, as she presents a community trying to preserve its identity while facing the pressures of a rapidly changing world. As noted by in her article on endangered nature and culture, Dai’s writing becomes an important voice for communities whose ecological and cultural worlds are under threat. Thus, not only narrates the story of a people but also reflects the emotional loss and resilience of indigenous life in contemporary times. *An Ecocritical Reading of Mamang Dai’s The Legends of Pensam*” echoes the same critical situation:

“...[t]hese stories are spread across a few generations of a family as a result of which the same characters reappear in most of the tales, giving the book a more or less novel-like structure. Traditional tribal beliefs form the nucleus of the lives of the characters in this book; spirits, shamans and unnatural events influence their lives in more ways than one. This intricate web of stories gradually unfolds into the history of a tribe. This book is an intermingling of myth and history of the tribe of Adis of the Siang valley....” (76).

The imagery used in *The Legends of Pensam* beautifully brings out the contrast between two changing worlds within the life of the Adi tribe. Through vivid descriptions of forests, rivers, mountains, villages,

and everyday life, Mamang Dai portrays the tension between the traditional indigenous worldview, deeply rooted in nature and community, and the growing influence of modernity and social change. Her imagery reflects both the beauty of the Adis' ecological harmony and the gradual disruption caused by contemporary developments. Discussing this aspect of the novel in their article, "The Representation of the Ethnic Life-World of the Adis in Mamang Dai's *The Legends of Pensam*: An Ecocritical Reading," Anindya Syam Choudhury and Debashree Chakraborty observe that Dai's imagery captures the coexistence of these two contrasting realities. On one side lies the traditional life shaped by myths, rituals, and a close bond with nature, while on the other stands the changing modern world that slowly distances people from their cultural roots and natural surroundings. An Ecocritical Reading" mention:

"On the one hand, the visuals are suggestive of the bounty of nature, of the dense foliage in the midst of which the Adis live a secured life oblivious to the ways of the world outside their territory, and on the other, there are stark visuals which highlight the grim situation of things going wrong in their cultural milieu owing to the exchanges with the world that is remote and different, a world which does not understand the simplicity of living in close proximity of a natural cover, and is rather thoroughly imposing and alluring." (44).

In the opening sections of *The Legends of Pensam*, the imagery creates a vivid picture of pure and untouched nature while also carrying a quiet sense of loss and longing. Mamang Dai uses natural landscapes not merely as background scenery but as emotional spaces that reflect the fading harmony between the people and their environment. The peaceful forests, mountains, and rivers of the Siang valley evoke the beauty of a world that is slowly disappearing under the pressure of modern changes. One of the most striking descriptions in the novel is that of the river flowing through the lush green Siang valley. Through this image, Dai presents nature as alive, nurturing, and deeply connected to the lives of the Adi tribe. At the same time, the tone carries a feeling of nostalgia and regret, suggesting an awareness that this pristine ecological world may not remain untouched forever.

"The river cuts through our land as before in its long journey to the sea. In spring the red flowers still blaze against our sky. But the old people now, the few of them alive, turn slowly in their sleep as the fires burn down to a heap of ash. In the middle of the night a bird swoops low and calls out in a wild, staccato note. The thatch rustles. The bamboo creaks. The darkness is full of breath and sighs. The rain comes gently, bathing the night"(4).

The Black Hill : Mapping Ecology and Indigenous Worldview

In *The Black Hill*, Dai explores the impact of colonialism on both nature and indigenous life. Set during the British expansion into the eastern Himalayan region, the novel shows how colonial powers tried to control land, forests, and rivers for their own benefit. In contrast, the indigenous communities see nature not as property, but as a living part of their identity and culture.

Through the character of Gimur, Dai presents the wisdom, strength, and deep ecological understanding of tribal communities. Gimur's knowledge of forests, herbs, and sacred landscapes reflects a way of life based on respect and harmony with nature. The novel highlights how colonial intrusion disturbed this balance by introducing new boundaries, systems, and exploitative practices that slowly damaged both the environment and traditional life. At its heart, is also a story of memory and survival. Dai gives voice to histories and experiences often ignored in colonial narratives and reminds readers of the importance of indigenous ecological knowledge in a rapidly changing world.

The tribal beliefs were guided along with, shaped by mythical thinking, intuitive thoughts of their union with nature and their culture are even loaded with mountain rituals and shamanic rituals. And within the backdrop of North-East India, the rise of shaktism or tantrism out of the local shamanistic religions of the Indo-Mongoloids has been widely acknowledged by scholars (Bhagabati 1998: 1). In this regard, Stirn and Van Ham opines that, "By instituting the shaman, the North-eastern people created an expert who have the ability to build right contact with spiritual beings. This becomes necessary when an imbalance arise in the world. Such shamanistic insight into the world's interrelations and the ability to make open contact with these forces distinguishes man from his fellow earthly creatures"(2000: 95).

Despite the disruptions caused by external forces, *The Black Hill* celebrates the resilience of indigenous communities and their enduring ecological consciousness. Dai portrays characters who, despite hardships, strive to maintain their cultural and environmental heritage. For instance, the character of Kajinsha embodies the spirit of resistance: "He held the stories of his ancestors, knowing they were the true heartbeat of the land" (*The Black Hill* 257).

This resilience reflects a commitment to sustaining the spiritual and ecological bonds with the landscape. Ecocriticism advocates for the recognition of such indigenous wisdom in contemporary environmental debates. As Ramachandra Guha and Juan Martínez-Alier argue, "The environmentalism of the poor often stems from a lived reality of environmental degradation and cultural loss, making their

struggles crucial for ecological sustainability” (Guha and Martínez-Alier 58). Dai’s narrative serves as a powerful reminder of the need to honor and learn from these perspectives.

The Black Hill by Mamang Dai presents a powerful picture of the close relationship between land, culture, and indigenous life. Through an ecocritical perspective, the novel shows that nature is not simply a background setting but a sacred and living presence deeply connected with human life and experience. Dai highlights the ecological wisdom and spiritual values preserved within tribal communities and emphasizes the importance of respecting their harmonious relationship with nature. At the same time, the novel also portrays how colonial and missionary interventions disrupted these traditional bonds between people and the environment.

Negotiating Modernity and Ecological Crisis:

Both indigenous ecocriticism and ethnopoetics serve as counter-discourses to the dominant narratives of modernity, colonialism, and environmental imperialism. They contest the erasure of indigenous epistemologies by asserting the intellectual, ecological, and artistic sovereignty of indigenous peoples. Mamang Dai’s literature participates in this intellectual resistance. Her work frequently critiques the imposition of developmentalist paradigms that devalue indigenous knowledge. In *The Black Hill*, British colonial agents view the forest as a frontier to be mapped, tamed, and commodified. Their attempts to introduce Christian morality, scientific rationality, and cartographic control are met with subtle but powerful resistance by the indigenous characters. Gimur, with her knowledge of herbs and trails, represents an alternative epistemology—one based on intimacy with the land rather than domination over it. This critique of epistemic violence—the imposition of one knowledge system over another—is central to indigenous ecocriticism. Scholars like Linda Tuhiwai Smith (1999) argue that colonization was not just a seizure of land but a suppression of indigenous ways of knowing. Literature like Dai’s restores that suppressed knowledge, offering a “textual sovereignty” (Warrior, 1995) where indigenous worldviews can speak back to power. Her writing also subverts the narrative of ecological crisis as a contemporary problem solvable by technocratic means. Instead, Dai shows that unsustainability is a colonial inheritance—the result of centuries of resource extraction, land dispossession, and cultural dislocation. By contrast, Adi ecological practices—encoded in stories, rituals, and oral law—represent long-standing strategies of resilience. Her literature thus becomes both a record and a resource: an archive of ecological wisdom and a blueprint for decolonial futures. The combined frameworks of indigenous ecocriticism and

ethnopoetics provide a rich interpretative lens through which Mamang Dai's work can be read as both ecological philosophy and cultural expression.

Dai's literature functions not only as aesthetic expression but also as a form of ecological resistance and cultural preservation. Through her nuanced storytelling, she renders visible the sophisticated ecological ethics of the Adi people—ethics that have long been ignored or undermined by dominant paradigms of development and conservation. Her writing defamiliarises the reader from the anthropocentric logic of mastery over nature and instead foregrounds a relational ontology where land, water, and forests are animated agents of culture and history. *The Legends of Pensam*, for example, integrates folklore, personal memory, and environmental observation to create a mosaic of Adi ecological consciousness. Similarly, in *The Black Hill*, she narrates the story of colonial incursion through the metaphor of geological and cultural rupture, exploring the entanglements of history, environment, and identity. These texts do not merely depict sustainable practices; they enact them through narrative forms that mirror ecological cycles, communal voice, and polyphonic temporality. D C Wahl strikes to the balance with a crystal clear goal:

“What we are actually trying to sustain is the underlying pattern of health, resilience and adaptability that maintain the planet in a condition where life as a whole can flourish. Design for sustainability is, ultimately, design for human and planetary health” (Wahl, p. 43).

Conclusion :

To conclude, Mamang Dai observes nature as a dynamic force that plays a vital role in shaping ecological consciousness of the readers. As the concepts of animism and eco-spirituality is visibly seen in Dai's poetry, she however, aimed to exert effort on the multidimensional aspects of ecology in her poetry. The idea of ecospiritualism is a powerful one hence undergoing change from time to time with newer perspectives added even with a slight change in the bio-socio-cultural milieu. There has been a significant shift in the anthropocentric emphasis on "ecology" to a bio-centric stress on "deep ecology" and from "deep ecology" to "radical environmentalism" demanding attention and involvement of creative writers to communicate through their works that This earth is our home and our creator.... The mountains, the seas, the endless prairie, the grasslands, the wetlands, the deserts and rainforests are all infinitely precious, both manifesting and partially constituting a proper object of religious concern. From this perspective, current human practices toward nature are a sacrilege - a gross irreverence toward this hallowed place. (Hettinger, 1995, p.94)

Through the theory of eco-spirituality, Dai anticipated to work on the heterogeneous aspects of ecology in her works. If her engagement with the spiritual aspects of her cultural heritage along with the theme of nature in her works continues, she can further explore the varied forms of ecospiritualism experienced not just in her immediate ecospiritual space but in the broader and more universal ecosphere, perhaps alleviating the subjectivity, and limited significance of her fiction with the larger canvas of the ecospiritual framework.

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