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Research Article

The Stratigraphy of Silence: A Critical Analysis of Mamang Dai's "The Voice of the Mountain"

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ABSTRACT

This paper presents an analysis of Mamang Dai's "The Voice of the Mountain," examining how the poet utilizes a geological persona to interrogate the intersections of deep time, indigenous epistemology, and political history in Northeast India. By shifting the lyric subject from the human to the non-human, Dai destabilizes anthropocentric narratives, offering a vantage point that views human history as fleeting "chapters of the world." The analysis employs close reading to demonstrate how the poem's formal elements mirror the fluid, yet stratified, nature of the landscape. Contextualized within the framework of Northeast Indian "literature of witness," as defined by scholars like Tilottama Misra and Robin S. Ngangom, the poem is revealed not as a Romantic pastoral, but as a resistance text. It critiques the "falsity" of state-imposed peace and explores the limitations of human language through the motif of the mute messenger. Ultimately, this study argues that Dai's mountain is a witness to the "long combat" of existence, offering a "dream of permanence" that acknowledges the violent dynamism of both the natural and political worlds.

Keywords: Mamang Dai, Northeast Indian Poetry, Ecocriticism, Deep Time, Mythopoeia.

Introduction

The corpus of literature emerging from Northeast India occupies a unique and often contentious space within the broader canon of Indian Writing in English. Historically marginalized by the "mainland" academic gaze and politically isolated by the "Chicken's Neck" corridor, the region has developed a literary tradition that is distinct in its epistemology and urgent in its tone. Unlike the post-independence literature of metropolitan India, which often grappled with the legacy of the Raj or the anxieties of the diaspora, Northeast Indian literature is forged in the crucible of ethnic assertions, insurgency, and a profound, often traumatic, transition from oral to written cultures. It is a literature of the frontier, not merely in a geographic sense, but in an existential one, navigating the jagged edges between the tribe and the nation, the mythic past and the violent present.

To understand the poetry of writers like Mamang Dai, one must first recognize that the literary output of this region is fundamentally a literature of witness. For decades, the dominant narrative of the Northeast was controlled by colonial administrators, anthropologists, and later, the Indian state's security apparatus, all of whom viewed the region through the lens of exoticism or conflict management. Indigenous writers, writing primarily in English as a bridge language between their diverse Tibeto-Burman and Austro-Asiatic tongues, have sought to reclaim this narrative. They write against the curfew of the mind, documenting the erasure of indigenous histories and the militarization of their homelands.

However, it is reductive to categorize this body of work solely as terror lore or conflict literature. While the "gun" is a pervasive metaphor, the most enduring preoccupation of these writers is the crisis of identity and the erosion of cultural roots. The transition from oral traditions—rich in folklore, animism, and ecological wisdom, to the print culture of modernity has created a sense of cultural anxiety. Writers are tasked with the double burden of preserving the "tribal memory" while critiquing the corruptions of the modern state.

Margaret Ch. Zama elucidates this burden, arguing that the emergence of these distinct voices is not merely an artistic endeavor but a political act of survival. In her analysis of the region's literary dynamics, she notes that for the Northeast writer, the creative act is inextricably linked to the assertion of a distinct selfhood against the homogenizing forces of the nation-state. Zama argues that the politics of identity, which has been

a major preoccupation of the region, finds valid expression in its literature. It is a literature that voices the fears and aspirations of a people who are grappling with the problems of transition and change, of a people who are trying to come to terms with their own history and identity (xii).

This "grappling with transition" is central to understanding the region's poetics. The landscape is not treated as a static pastoral scene but as a dynamic, living entity that holds the archives of this identity. Whether it is the riverine plains of Assam or the mountainous terrain of Arunachal Pradesh, the geography is politically charged. Thus, when a poet from this region invokes a mountain or a river, they are often performing an act of "cartographic reclamation," mapping their ancestors' presence onto a land that modern maps seek to divide. It is within this turbulent yet vibrant literary ecosystem that Mamang Dai's "The Voice of the Mountain" resonates, acting as a bridge between the mute wisdom of the "ancient" earth and the chaotic "new" reality of the postcolonial state.

Many of Mamang Dai's poetry operates at the intersection of geology and memory, where the landscape is not merely a passive backdrop for human activity but an active, sentient participant in the construction of history. In her seminal poem, "The Voice of the Mountain[1]," Dai abandons the anthropocentric lyric "I" in favor of a geological persona - the mountain itself - to articulate a vision of existence that transcends the fleeting nature of human politics and linear time. As a prominent voice from Arunachal Pradesh, a region historically marginalized in the Indian literary canon and fraught with geopolitical tension, Dai utilizes this shifted perspective to reclaim the narrative of the land. This analysis seeks to explore the poem through a rigorous close reading, examining how the formal qualities of the verse complement its thematic preoccupation with the tension between the "ancient and new." "The Voice of the Mountain" is not a retreat into romantic nature worship, but a complex assertion of indigenous epistemology that critiques the falsity of imposed peace and validates the enduring, if silent, language of the earth.

Contextualizing the Voice: Northeast Indian Writing in English

To fully appreciate the gravity of the Mountain's voice, one must first situate Mamang Dai within the broader framework of Northeast Indian literature. For decades, the literary output of this region, comprising the "Seven Sister" states, was viewed by the mainstream Indian academy through the lens of conflict studies or exoticized anthropology. However, as the scholar Tilottama Misra notes in her introduction to *The Oxford Anthology of Writings from North-East India*, the literature from this region has evolved from a "romantic celebration of the landscape" into a "literature of witness" that grapples with the violent transformations of history (Misra xv).

The writers of this region, including Dai, Temsula Ao, and Robin S. Ngangom, write against a backdrop of the reality of insurgency and military intervention. Yet, Dai's approach is distinct. While Ngangom often writes from the visceral street level of the conflict, Dai retreats to the mythic. However, this retreat is strategic. By adopting the voice of the mountain, she adopts a perspective that is "pre-historical" and therefore immune to the erasures of modern political history. This posits the land as the ultimate archivist. The "high platform" mentioned in the opening line is not just an elevation in space, but an elevation in time, allowing the speaker to view the "chapters of the world" with a detachment that human actors cannot possess.

The poem opens with a declaration of placement:

"From where I sit on the high platform
I can see the ferry lights crossing
criss-crossing the big river."

Immediately, the reader is confronted with a non-human subjectivity. The "high platform" suggests a throne or a watchtower, evoking a sense of surveillance. However, unlike the colonial or military gaze which seeks to control territory, the mountain's gaze is observational.

The imagery of the "ferry lights crossing / criss-crossing" serves as the first intersection between the ancient (the river) and the modern (the ferry lights). Formally, the repetition of "crossing" and "criss-crossing" mimics the visual movement of the boats, creating a rhythm that is jagged, interrupting the flow of the "big river." This is a subtle formal acknowledgement of modernity's intrusion into the landscape. The river, likely the Siang (Brahmaputra), is a life force that predates the towns and the estuary mouth.

When the Mountain says, "I know the towns, the estuary / mouth," it claims an epistemological dominance. To "know" in this context is to understand the ontology of these places, not just their geography. The "estuary mouth" is a liminal space where the river meets the sea, a site of transition. The subsequent lines, "There, beyond the last bank / where the colour drains from heaven / I can outline the chapters of the world," introduce a metaphysical dimension. The "draining of colour" suggests the horizon, the limit of perception, or perhaps the end of the day. Yet, the Mountain can "outline the chapters of the world." This metaphor of "chapters" textually constructs the world as a narrative. The Mountain reads the earth as a text. This is a crucial inversion of the colonial dynamic where the explorer "reads" and "maps" the land; here, the land reads the world.

The third stanza marks a shift from the panoramic to the specific, introducing a human element that disrupts the solitude of the mountain.

The other day a young man arrived from the village.

Because he could not speak he brought a gift of fish from the land of rivers.

This encounter is central to the poem's argument regarding language. The young man is mute ("could not speak"), yet he communicates successfully through a "gift of fish." In the context of Adi culture and riverine communities, fish is a primal symbol of sustenance and life derived from the river. By offering the fish, the young man is offering a piece of the landscape itself.

The enjambment of the word "Because" on a line of its own is a masterstroke of form. It forces the reader to pause, creating a suspense that highlights the cause-and-effect relationship between his silence and his action. He brought the gift *because* he could not speak. Dai suggests here that human language is often inadequate or insufficient for true communion with the sacred or the natural. The act of giving is a "sign" that transcends the "changing languages" mentioned later.

The Mountain observes, "It / seems such acts are repeated." This repetition alludes to ritual. The interaction between the human and the divine (or the geological) is cyclical. The individual man may be new, but the gesture is ancient. This collapses the timeline, reinforcing the Mountain's perception of time as a recurring loop rather than a linear progression.

Territories Ancient and New: Postcolonial Identity

The fourth stanza contains one of the most quoted lines in Northeast Indian poetry: "We live in territories forever ancient and new." This paradox perfectly encapsulates the postcolonial condition of Arunachal Pradesh. The territory is "ancient" in its geological and tribal history, but "new" in its political formation as a state within the Indian union, and "new" in the constant flux of modernization. This duality can be critically examined through **Homi K. Bhabha's** concept of the **"interstitial perspective"** from *The Location of Culture* (3). Bhabha argues that contemporary cultural identity is not found in fixed origins, but emerges in the "in-between" spaces, the interstices, that provide the terrain for elaborating strategies of selfhood (Bhabha 1). Dai's landscape occupies precisely this interstice; by asserting that the territory is *simultaneously* ancient and new, she refuses to relegate tribal identity to a static past or surrender it to a homogenized modern future. Instead, the Mountain negotiates a "Third Space" where the "ancient" memory informs and critiques the "new" political reality.

Dai writes, "and as we speak in changing languages." This acknowledges the linguistic shifting of the region, from Tibeto-Burman dialects to Assamese, Hindi, and English. The "changing languages" represent the instability of human culture and the negotiation of power within this interstitial space. In contrast, the Mountain's language, the language of wind and rock, remains constant.

The speaker then says, "I, also, leave my spear leaning by the tree and try to make a sign." This is a profound moment of personification and disarmament. The "spear" is a symbol of the warrior tradition of the tribes (such as the Adi). By leaving the spear "leaning by the tree," the Mountain (assuming the avatar of a tribal elder or warrior) is choosing dialogue over conflict. The attempt to "make a sign" connects the Mountain back to the mute young man. Both are striving for a semiotic system that bypasses the violence of standard speech. The "sign" is a universal, pre-linguistic mode of communication, suggesting that the only way to reconcile the "ancient and new" is through symbols rather than political rhetoric.

"I / am an old man / sipping the breeze that is forever young." Here, the metaphor becomes explicit. The Mountain creates a dual identity: it is the rocky edifice and simultaneously an elder of the tribe. The juxtaposition of the "old man" and the "young breeze" highlights the symbiotic relationship between the static (mountain) and the kinetic (wind/breeze).

"In my life I have lived many lives." This line invokes the concept of reincarnation or the geological stratification of time. The mountain has been a seabed, a forest, a battlefield. The "transfer of symbols" mentioned in this stanza echoes the semiotic struggle of the previous lines. The Mountain claims to be "the chance syllable that orders the world." This is a powerful assertion of logos. In many creation myths, the world is brought into being through a word or sound (Om, Logos). Dai attributes this ordering power to the Mountain, elevating the landscape to the status of a deity or a creator.

The mention of "taboos and rituals / instructed with history and miracles" grounds the poem in the specific cultural context of the Adi people. The landscape is not empty; it is encoded with "taboos" (what cannot be done) and "rituals" (what must be done). This aligns with the eco-critical view that indigenous landscapes are "moral landscapes," where the physical terrain dictates ethical behavior.

The Illusion of Peace

The final stanza delivers the poem's most searing critique: "In the end the universe yields nothing / except a dream of permanence." The use of the word "dream" is vital. Permanence is not real; it is a desire, a "dream" of the human and perhaps of the mountain. Geology suggests permanence to the human eye, but the mountain knows it is slowly eroding, shifting, and changing.

Then comes the pivotal line: "Peace is a falsity." This statement stands in stark contrast to the conventional Romantic view of nature as a sanctuary of peace (the pastoral retreat). Dai rejects this. Nature is a site of "long combat." The mountain is born of tectonic violence; the food chain is a cycle of predation.

"A moment of rest comes after long combat." Here, Dai aligns geological violence with human political violence. In the context of Northeast India, where "peace accords" are often signed and broken, and where

"peace" is often an enforced silence by the state, the Mountain's declaration is political. True peace does not exist; there is only a temporary cessation of hostilities ("a moment of rest").
This cynical, yet realistic, worldview challenges the reader to accept the volatility of existence. The Mountain does not offer false hope. It offers the "truth" of rocks and rain—that struggle is intrinsic to existence.

Conclusion

Dai's work is a form of "mythopoeia" that serves as a resistance strategy. Ngangom asserts in his essays that the Northeast poet is often forced to look inward or backward because the present is too traumatic or chaotic (14-19). By voicing the Mountain, Dai creates a "mythic time" that overrides "political time."
Furthermore, applying Tilottama Misra's framework, we see that Dai is negotiating the 'insider/outsider' dynamic. The Mountain is the ultimate "insider", it *is* the place. By speaking as the Mountain, Dai asserts an indigenous claim to the land that predates national borders or colonial maps. The "ferry lights" and "towns" are mere surface scratches on the deep time of the mountain. The poem also invites an eco-critical reading. The "gift of fish" and the knowledge of "rocks" suggest an ontology where the human and non-human are porous. The human is not the master of the land but a fleeting visitor who must learn the "signs" of the earth to survive. The "peace is a falsity" line can be read as an ecological truth, nature is dynamic and often violent, as well as a political commentary.
"The Voice of the Mountain" is a masterwork of stratified meaning. On the surface, it is a lyrical evocation of the Himalayan landscape. Below that, it is a meditation on the limits of language and the power of symbols. At its bedrock, it is a postcolonial critique of history and the illusion of peace. Mamang Dai does not use the Mountain to escape reality, but to confront it from a vantage point that reveals the "criss-crossing" currents of time, identity, and change. The poem ultimately suggests that while "peace is a falsity," the "dream of permanence" remains a necessary fiction for survival, a dream sustained by the "chance syllable" of poetry itself.

Note

[1] All references to Mamang Dai's poem "The Voice of the Mountain" are to page 46 of her collection *River Poems* (Writers Workshop, 2004).

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