



## Postcolonial Elements in Mamang Dai's *Escaping the Land*: An Exploration

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### ARTICLE INFO

### ABSTRACT

Mamang Dai is one of the representative novelists from the Northeast. Hailing from Arunachal Pradesh, Dai engages deeply with postcolonial themes in her literary works. Her writings echo the complex tapestry of Northeast India, exploring the issues of identity, resistance, language and the enduring impact of Colonialism. Mamang Dai's exploration of cultural identity is central to her postcolonial narrative. Resistance against oppressive forces is a recurrent theme in her novels. Through the means of storytelling method, Dai preserves the history, myths and traditions of the diverse communities of Northeast India. This article probes deeply the postcolonial elements in her novel *Escaping the Land*, examining how she navigates the intricate terrain of Postcolonial literature.

**Keywords:** Northeast, postcolonial, identity, resistance and Colonialism.

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According to Elleke Boehmer, "To give expression to colonized experience, postcolonial writers sought to undercut thematically and formally the discourses which supported colonization – the myths of power, the race classifications, the imagery of subordination. Postcolonial literature, therefore, is deeply marked by experiences of cultural exclusion and division under empire"(3). Mamang Dai's exploration of cultural identity is central to her postcolonial narrative. The various tribes of Arunachal Pradesh, with their distinct languages, traditions and histories form the backdrop against which Dai weaves her narrative. Her novel *Escaping the Land* captures a turbulent period of Arunachal Pradesh after the independence of India. Succeeding the independence-in the year 1948-the central government of India created North East Frontier Agency (NEFA) in order to strengthen the border security. In 1972, NEFA got the status of Union Territory and was re-named as Arunachal Pradesh. After much agitation and turmoil, it finally got the status of a state in the year 1987. The novel is an alliance of history, myth and contemporary politics of Arunachal Pradesh where the issue of autonomy is very significant. Dai describes NEFA in the following manner: "NEFA was a cruel place where officers, soldiers and priests had been attacked and killed, and tribal chiefs and villagers had lost their lives in endless hostilities. There were no roads, no electricity, no towns, shops, nothing; yet men came forward, lured by a sense of adventure and willingness to serve" (Dai 30).

In addition to this, there are many a danger hiding in the land: thousands of leeches, herds of wild elephants roaming freely etc..The forces of Colonialism, even after the independence of India, in the form of mainstream political forces, attempted to homogenize and subjugate diverse cultures of Arunachal Pradesh. After freedom from British forces, the Indian government framed an in-between policy towards NEFA. This approach is somewhere between British policy of 'leave them alone' and the policy of 'extreme assimilation or detribalisation'. For the smooth implementation of this approach, indigenous officers like Lipun's expertise is needed: "Government officers like Lipun were the new arbitrators"(Dai 32). In the same vein Dai narrates: "This time Lipun went alone. He was returning to the Kameng hills and marching to take up residence in a two-room hut. The villagers stared at him. He looked like them. He was no outsider"(Dai 44). During this period, Lipun took Lutor under his patronage and also took responsibility of his education. With Lipun, Lutor gradually spreads his wings and takes formal education as much as he can. Lipun groomed Lutor as a student leader: "But Lipun was gently pushing him into an arena where his service is needed for emerging state"(Dai 53). Lipun's efforts bore fruits: "When Lipun was posted to Itanagar, Lutor was in his final year in University"(Dai

53). After his image as a firebrand student leader, Lutor become a youth leader: "Lutor plunged into youth activities and worked on a constitution for a fledgling Student's Union that took birth at this time"(Dai 54). Then Lutor founded his regional party braving all obstacles in the aftermath of the formation of the state: "Lutor had launched his regional All-NEFA Peoples' Party (ANP). It was a protest against the overbearing tactics of national parties but he had had few takers"(Dai 58). It is a really difficult job for Lutor to sustain his party because everyone toes the line of Indian National Congress (INC), a national party, including his arch-rival, Tanik, a shrewd politician.

Characters in Dai's works find themselves at the intersection of tradition and modernity, grappling with the challenge of preserving cultural heritage in the face of external influences. This negotiation between the old and the new, the indigenous and the foreign, reflects a broader postcolonial experience. Dai's nuanced portrayal of characters navigating this cultural hybridity adds depth to her exploration of identity in a postcolonial context. In this backdrop, Lipun and Lutor, the administrator and the politician respectively, went hand in glove with each other for the freedom of all kinds for the state of Arunachal Pradesh.

Resistance against oppressive forces, both historical and contemporary, is a recurrent theme in Dai's novels. The historical struggles of indigenous communities against ruling class find echoes in her narratives, as characters confront obstacles to their autonomy and cultural integrity. Dai's works often highlight the resilience of communities in the wake of external pressures, embodying the spirit of resistance that characterizes Postcolonial literature. Lutor addressed public in the following manner: "Everywhere people love their land. It is life, birth, happiness and children. It is our source of strength and our inspiration. It is life"(Dai, 82). In contrast to Arunachal Pradesh, Delhi is regarded as dangerous place: "Delhi is dangerous. Don't send your children there. They will never come back!"(Dai 85)

The quest for autonomy extends beyond political independence. It encompasses the preservation of cultural autonomy, economic self-sufficiency and the right to define one's own narrative. In *Escaping the Land*, the presence of Chakma refugees in Arunachal Pradesh is seriously objected by village elders as they are destroying their culture: "They are encroaching on our land, killing our animals and destroying our forests"(Dai 59). Thus, characters in Dai's novels engage in various forms of resistance, from challenging cultural assimilation to questioning the impact of modernization on traditional ways of life. Through the narratives of her novels, Dai contributes to the larger discourse on postcolonial struggles for self-determination.

Dai's engagement with Postcolonial themes extends to environmental issues, reflecting the interconnectedness of socio-cultural and ecological dimensions in postcolonial setting. The exploitation of natural resources during the colonial era and its enduring impact on the environment form a critical backdrop to her narrative. In *Escaping the Land*, there is a subtle hint that colonial rulers exploited their natural resources. But even in the postcolonial era, the natural assets are looted by timber barons in collusion with the political leaders. Kellan was a forest officer of the Tirap District, famous for militant activities. An honest officer, Kellan wants to protect the natural forest wealth at any cost. But the problem is: "Money was pouring into the state for countless schemes and everyone was learning the art of acquiring wealth"(Dai 179). In fact, Kellan is not interested in minting illegal money: "He simply did not know how to make money and he did not want to have any part in the booming timber trade. Timber merchants had arrived from all over the country and they were going deep into the forest and felling trees like demented forest dwellers" (Dai 179). The state's tradition of fearing the spirits and reverence for sacred trees was done away with for the lure of filthy lucre: "The old awe of spirits and sacred trees was quashed as they slavered, looking at these giant trees they meant Money!Money!Money!"(Dai 180) The Forest Department allowed cutting down five trees by issuing permit on compassionate ground. But they sold the permits to the businessmen, ministers and politicians who in turn plundered the natural wealth and caused irreparable damage to the environment:

The easy way was to sell the permits to middle-men who were in the timber business with ministers and politicians who owned saw mills and plywood and veneer mills. Five or ten trees – who cared? There was no one around to count. The timber barons despatched a labour force armed with mallets to mark their trees. They marked hundreds of trees and devoured them with men and elephants clinking with metal chains. Their eyes turned red with fever and greed. What would they get out of all this labour? Perhaps a motorcycle, a wad of money, a new car. The heavy, inert logs tried their patience and their strength and they dragged them out crudely through the undergrowth crushing plants, leaves, roots, insects and orchids in a mangled and rotting green trail of death. (Dai 180)

As a matter of fact, Dai's characters grapple with ecological challenges, linking environmental degradation to the historical exploitation of natural resources by ruling classes. Through her environment-friendly perspective, Dai foregrounds the lasting consequences of Colonialism on the land of Arunachal Pradesh and its people. The postcolonial experience, for Dai, is not only about political autonomy but also about reclaiming a harmonious relationship with the natural world disrupted by colonial interventions.

The inheritance of colonial economic structure and the impact of Globalization are subjects of keen interest in Mamang Dai's narrative. The economic manipulation that characterized colonial rule leaves a lasting impression on postcolonial societies. Dai's characters confront the challenges of development, modernization and globalization, raising questions about the equitable distribution of natural resources. Lipun and Lutor are such characters in *Escaping the Land* who braved barriers and shaped the destiny of people. Lutor remembered the Rainman's chanting and bringing the rain: "Lutor recalled people saying they had never seen such a dark, thundery day. The image stayed with him and his years with Lipun nurtured it. It was an image of silhouettes

that nothing could wipe away, they were so imprinted in his mind” (Dai 208). In the same vein, Lutor went on: “He knew this image was about Time and the transition of an unknown land into a modern state. This was due to men like Lipun and all those frontier men who had done the patient groundwork” (Dai 208). Actually, the tension between development and cultural preservation became integral to Dai’s portrayal of postcolonial realities.

Mamang Dai’s engagement with postcolonial themes is deeply rooted in a historical perspective, and her novels often serve as repository of cultural memory. Through storytelling, she preserves the history, myths and traditions of the diverse communities in Northeast India. Her act of cultural preservation is a response to the erasure attempted by colonial powers and a testament to the resilience of indigenous cultures. In *Escaping the Land*, the history of Adi community is narrated in the following manner: “Before everything else there was the land of Kojum-Koja, a sacred place beyond the moon and stars. This was the first civilization from where man began his journey through the different heavens to descend into the world carrying stories of happiness and hope”(Dai 90). This creation myth is unraveled by a group of ponung dancers: “A group of twenty ponung dancers were already in place, ready to start their performance. They all wore red ga-les and short, black jackets. The man leading the dance as the shaman-miri for the night had been specially invited from the village of Sigar across the river”(Dai 89-90). The story of lost civilization by losing to the water king and the resurgence of the same by the earth mother is narrated faithfully by Dai: “The miri shook his sword and a lost world came to life as the grand lady of mythology, mother Kiine Naane, source of all seed and grain was resurrected in verse. She filled the house. Her vast granary was spread out before her like a rippling sea of gold in the warm sunlight” (Dai 91).

Thus, Mamang Dai’s narratives become a bridge between the past and the present, inviting readers to confront the historical legacies that shape contemporary realities. In so doing, Dai contributes to the postcolonial project of reclaiming and asserting cultural identities that have been marginalized by colonial history.

In conclusion, it may be said that Dai’s *Escaping the Land* is a collage that interweaves postcolonial elements. Through her exploration of cultural identity, resistance, environmental concerns, the economic aftermath of colonialism, and the preservation of historical perspectives, Dai contributes to the broader discourse on Postcolonial literature. Her narratives transcend the boundaries of the Northeast, offering readers a profound understanding of the complexities and challenges faced by societies as a consequence of colonial rule. Dai’s writings are a significant addition to the global chorus of Postcolonial writers, enriching the literary landscape with her unique perspective and nuanced storytelling.

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