

**Political Undercurrents in Mamang Dai's Poetry: A Critical Examination within the  
Context of North East India's Lost Forests, Towns and the River**

DOI: <https://doi.org/10.69627/NOL2024VOL1ISS1-02>

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**Noesis Literary Volume 1 Issue 1 (Jan- Jun) 2024, pp 13-23**

**ISSN : 3048-4693**

Within the regional context of India's North East, the indebtedness to its rivers extends beyond a mere geographical acknowledgment, permeating diverse facets of the cultural fabric. These watercourses, serving as natural demarcations, transcend their topographical roles, profoundly influencing various elements, including the lyrical compositions of ballads and the intricacies of daily existence. The fluid trajectories and transformative nuances of these rivers wield a profound impact, shaping the very essence of existence. Notably, the metamorphosis of river courses significantly influences culinary practices, dictating the contours of local cuisines.

In a literary sphere, the rivers of the North East assume a symbolic prominence, transcending their geographical significance to become integral elements in the region's literary discourse. Literature, conceived as an incessant cycle of narration and reinterpretation, establishes a symbiotic relationship with transient texts and ideas, with each literary creation contributing a layer to the region's expansive narrative tradition. T.S. Eliot's proposition that accomplished

literature adds to the zenith of tradition underscores the dynamic interplay between contemporary literary works and the cultural legacy they inherit.

The intersection between literature and societal reflection remains a recurrent motif, echoing Salman Rushdie's assertion that literature serves as a reflective mirror capturing the intricacies of society, its political dynamics, and structural foundations. Within this intricate interplay, Mamang Dai, a distinguished female writer emerging from the Adi tribe nestled in the Himalayan foothills of Arunachal Pradesh, assumes the role of a storyteller intricately interwoven with her indigenous traditions, immediate surroundings, personal experiences, and the collective identity of her people. Through her poetic expressions, Dai adeptly navigates the currents of tradition, presenting a narrative that not only mirrors but also actively contributes to shaping the cultural ethos of India's North East.

Human beings have always been dependent on the nature for survival. This dependence has crafted a close association between women and nature. The theory of ecofeminism focusses on this linkage between women and nature. French writer Françoise d'Eaubonne is credited with coining of the term ecofeminism. The emergence of ecofeminism can be traced back to 1970s with the rise of involvement of women in ecological movements. As women became involved in ecological issues, they started realizing how patriarchal dominance is connected with exploitation of nature. To put it in the words of Birkeland (1993), ecofeminism is “value system, a social movement, and a practice... (which) also offers a political analysis that explores the links between androcentrism and environmental destruction. It is an “awareness” that begins with the realization that the exploitation of nature is intimately linked to Western Man’s attitude toward women and tribal cultures...” Vandana Shiva labels modern technology as a western and patriarchal notion that puts women and nature at bay. In the name of this growth paradigm women are being marginalized and displaced. Women in general and third world women in particular live in close proximity with and have special knowledge of nature. But the advent of science and technology has changed this equation between women and nature. The poems of Mamang Dai are a reflection of this ecological proximity with the local tribes of northeastern region.

Raymond Williams, in his seminal work *The Country and the City* (1973), articulated a compelling argument elucidating the substantial contributions of English literature to

pastoral, rural landscapes, nature, and urban environments. While Williams did not expressly intend to advocate or explore environmentalism or ecocriticism within eighteenth-century literature, his meticulous analysis adeptly demonstrated the pervasive influence of nature and its various elements on literary works. This scholarly endeavor by Williams can be regarded as a pivotal moment in the incipient development of ecocriticism and ecocritical theory within the domain of English literature.

Fundamentally, the genesis of ecocriticism can be traced back to Williams' insightful revelation that texts harbor intricate foundations interwoven with natural elements, extending into cultural practices. His exploration marked a critical juncture, establishing a theoretical framework that acknowledges the symbiotic relationship between literature and the environment. This foundational work by Williams contributed significantly to the subsequent emergence of ecocriticism, a literary and cultural theory that systematically examines the representation of nature in literary texts while scrutinizing the reciprocal impact between literature and the environment.

In essence, ecocriticism, as an academic discipline, embarked on its trajectory with the understanding that literary works are profoundly embedded in and influenced by the natural world. The intricate interplay between texts and the environment, as highlighted by Williams, laid the groundwork for scholars and critics to delve further into the ecological dimensions of literature. Consequently, this conceptual shift engendered a heightened awareness of the ecological implications within literary narratives, enriching the discourse surrounding environmental consciousness in the realm of literary studies. The political system that India has created can credit itself of succeeding in its 'nation-building' process, Baruah (2005)<sup>1</sup> writes. He argues that the Indian state "has been able to incorporate and suppress sub-nationalist protests successfully either by use of force or by persuasion" (123). Rudolph and Rudolph (1985)<sup>2</sup> consider this process of nation-building in "a subcontinent where the historical legacy of state formation is marked by intermittent tensions between the imperial state and regional kingdoms" a "rather unfortunate modern transplant". P.T Bauer was against the perversion of language with the use of different figures of speech. For him, the act nation-

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<sup>1</sup> Sanjib Baruah, *Durable Disorder: Understanding the politics of North East India*, 123-126 (Oxford University Press, New Delhi).

<sup>2</sup> Paul Wallace (ed.), *Region and Nation in India*, 40-59 (Oxford and IBH Publishing co.ltd., New Delhi, 1985).

building implied “lifeless bricks, to be moved by some master builder”.<sup>3</sup> Baruah uses the term ‘subnationalism’ to refer to the politics of identity in India’s north east.

Most post-colonial nations inevitably see the formation of a certain center and a periphery. In the center reside big cities with the elites, the ones that hold power (through money, politics, lineage etc.); the center is also the economic hub. This isn’t a reference to the governments that come to power, rather the entirety of processes and systems that enable a certain location or a ‘type’ of people (this type can be determined by a variety of social factors including such things perhaps as religion, class, or caste) to remain as the ‘center’ for the margins. The margins are those that have had to either consensually or forcefully surrender certain rights to the center in exchange for the promise of the benefits; they have lesser power and sometimes lesser rights. They are different from the center in their qualities.

In the mid-twentieth century, as the Second World War ended, along with migrants, there was a sudden increase in the number of post-colonial ‘nations’. Most colonial powers were beginning to leave their colonies and new nation states were emerging. While most nations returned to their existence during the pre-colonial times, many new nations were carved out or the existing colony split into new nations. Two years after the war, when the Indian subcontinent got independence from nearly two hundred years of colonial oppression under the British, there was a change in the region’s cartography.

However, what the colonial forces could neither control or take away is the lifeline of the region- its rivers. But the worrying factor only worsens when we look at the destruction of these resources in the name of development takes place post-independence. Thus, it is no surprise that Dai’s poetry specifically looks at the effects of deforestation, encroachment by humans on forest lands, the ever-present impacts of climate change and its effects on the region’s fauna et. al. She ties these issues up with the oral lore of her place and her language while glorifying the deification of forests and the rivers and the humane connect amongst all these practices. She believes that animal lives are as important as human lives are.

In *The Legends of Pensam*, Dai writes:

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<sup>3</sup> P.T. Bauer in ‘Reality and Rhetoric: Studies in the Economics of Development’ calls people or citizens of a nation as lifeless bricks. Several other metaphors on similar lines exist. For Donald McCloskey the similar metaphor is of a “handsome neoclassical building in which political prisoners scream in the basement” (McCloskey, 1990) See also, P.T. Bauer, *Reality and Rhetoric: Studies in the Economics of Development*, (Harvard University Press, 1986); Donald N. McCloskey, *If you are so smart: The Narrative of Economic Enterprise*, (University of Chicago Press, Chicago 1990).

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 (4)

She alludes to the extensive degradation, encompassing not only the ecological sphere but also venerable cultural mores. Her discourse transcends the mere vicissitudes associated with transformation, probing the attendant ramifications thereof. Dai articulates her disquiet towards the gradual effacement of time-honored traditions, reminiscent of smoldering embers within the dormancy of repose. A salient concern for Dai resides in the transmutation of these erstwhile sylvan enclaves into crucibles for insurgent activities. These insurgents, vestiges of colonialist legacies, partition residues, and the prevailing periphery-center dichotomy, constitute the focal point of her apprehension. This sentiment finds resonance in Dai's literary work "Remembrance," where she eloquently posits, "The jungle is a night eater, concealing terror in carnivorous greens." Dai thereby underscores the current function of these arboreal domains as bastions for guerrilla factions, consequently transmogrifying hitherto serene and tranquil nocturnal environs into arenas punctuated by the staccato of gunfire, a thematic motif encapsulated in her composition "Gone."

At night we sleep with galls  
tugging at land and oceans  
and ropes coiled to barren rock  
where once flowers were to seed  
pumping blood and singing voices.

*Midsummer Survival Lyrics, 13*

Walter Laqueur, while describing representations of partisan struggles states that, "Fiction should not be disparaged" (Guerrilla, viii). For him, while fictional representations like Hemingway's *For Whom the Bells Toll* do provide a far clearer picture of being a partisan than volumes of military history, these novels deal with individuals and their fates. Laqueur

believes that fiction is of little value when it comes to understanding guerrilla<sup>4</sup> warfare as a political and military phenomenon (Guerrilla, viii).

However, to say “fiction is of little value” in understanding aspects of guerrilla war is problematic. A reading of Parag Das’s *Sanglot Fenla* will assert how the involvement of the Assamese youth in a guerrilla war against the Indian state allows for an intricate understanding of this form of war including its impact on the participants and the nature around them. Dai writes,

The night has no more songs  
What will it sing  
Now that the moon has drowned  
And the song birds with it...  
*Midsummer Survival Lyrics, 20*

What’s important here, in the aforementioned lines is the use of the word moon. The moon is a symbol of manifestation in Adi traditions and the drowning of the moon symbolises the dark times in which the people of her land find themselves entangled in. This very violence creates a sense of turmoil in the mind of the poet and ensues an existentialist description of the place she is in.

Other than violence, the region is also trifled with issues of a hackneyed idea of sovereignty, perpetual penury of a large part of its population, visibly permeable borders and a migration that sees no end. History bears the witness that North-East India has always been subject to migration from various parts of neighbouring places. Surrounded by hills and beautiful rivers, the North-East has remained isolated from the rest of the India due to its location.<sup>5</sup> With a view that the border-lying region has been susceptible to movement from neighbouring areas, it can be argued that migration was aided by the advent of British Rule in the region. Discovery of oil, beginning of tea cultivation and an administration eager to make the most out of the region’s resources led to both encouraged and forced migration to the state. This

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<sup>4</sup> Derived from the Spanish ‘guerrer’, the word guerrilla means ‘small war’. The word guerrilla first came into operation after Empicenado’s “small wars” against the Bonapartist regime in Spain between 1808 and 1813 warfare (Baishya, 306)

<sup>5</sup> Nandita Saikia, Apala Saha, *et.at.*, *Trends in immigration from Bangladesh to Assam, 1951-2001*, (IMDS Working Paper Series, International Migration and Diaspora Studies Project, Zakir Hussain Centre for Educational Studies, School of Social Sciences, Jawaharlal Nehru University, New Delhi, 2016)

intention was prosaic and can be seen throughout history in various parts of the world. However, even after the partition of the Indian subcontinent as the British left Indian shores, the movement of people didn't come to an end. Migrants routinely crossed an unchecked border, initially under the banner of 'homecoming' post-partition and subsequently in search of employment, land and a better life.

There were no strangers  
In our valley  
Recognition was instant  
As clan by clan we grew  
And destiny was simple

*River Poems, 79*

Dai presents a point of view that believes that the arrival of migrants has impacted the age-old traditions of her land. This arrival is illegal and has been aided by an anti-encroachment plan susceptible to money. She argues that this has led to massive changes in the towns and villages of her valley and has swamped and overshadowed the identity of the clans and tribes.

Migration, settlement,  
The breeze of hometowns, moonrise.  
Time has changed the language of our days  
Before-then-after-now

*Midsummer Survival Lyrics, 26*

If we go back to the argument of P.T Bauer about language mentioned in this paper, we'll understand that language is an important basis of identity. It is not only a means of communication but the fabric over which a human being carves out a life for themselves. In her poem *An Obscure Place*, Dai exclaims that the arrival of these 'strangers' has led to a change in their own traditions and has impacted their most revered cog of identity- their language.

The words of strangers  
Have led us into a mist  
Deeper than the ones we left behind;  
Weeping like waving grassland  
Here the bones of our fathers are buried

Surrounded by thoughts of beauty

*Midsummer Survival Lyrics, 18*

Women in particular share a very close relationship with the ecology. Women very often are compared to mother nature as they can bear life into this world. The way women are being exploited in a patriarchal society; the environment is also being exploited by the dominant sections of the society. Dai uses her poems to channelise her concern for environmental exploitation. In her poem “An Obscure Place” she pens down her concern over the gradually estranged relationship between the local people and the environment. She uses metaphors like ‘killing of the wild cat and hornbill’ to denote the exploitation and destruction of the environment; and the way these issues has been politicised that even the media remains silent.

If there is no death the news is silent.

If there is only silence, we should be disturbed

Listen, the tone of a prayer is hushed:

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 words of strangers have led us into a mist

deeper than the one we left behind

weeping, like a waving grassland

where the bones of our fathers are buried

surrounded by thoughts of beauty.

*An Obscure Place*

The ecofeminists resonate the discriminations faced by women with the destruction faced by environment in a patriarchal society. The way the voices of women are marginalised in a patriarchy, environmental concerns are also silenced in a capitalist society. In the contemporary societal landscape, the prevailing trend is an inclination towards the prioritization of significant global issues such as war. Regrettably, amidst this prioritization,



there exists a discernible oversight and neglect of the voices emanating from the marginalised segments of the population. The intricate fabric of social dynamics is woven not only by grand narratives but also by the perspectives and experiences of those traditionally relegated to the periphery. Dai in the poem, *The Sorrow of Women*, represents the issues faced the women and how these issues are silenced considering them to be of lesser importance than that of other issues. We now a days are so busy fighting for so called bigger issues that we pay no heed to smaller issues around us. She questions what good this will bring to the society without knowing the sorrow of women. We will have to know both the sorrows of the women as well as the sorrows of environment for survival.

“My love, what shall I do?

I am thinking how I may lose you

To war, and big issues

More important than me....

Ah! That urgency for survival,

But what will they do?

Not knowing the sorrow of woman.” (Dai)

*The Sorrow of Women*

F. J. Richard (1929) in his essay ‘Cultural Regions in India’ uses five criteria to test the validity of his hypothesis on cultural regions in India. According to him, administration and politics, linguistics, religion, social composition and movement are the bases on which a region can be defined. Similarly, in ‘Regions: Subjective and Objective’ (1967), Cohn writes that there are certain characteristic axioms for the classification of regions along historical, linguistic, cultural and socio-structural variables in South Asian historical geographies, much of which remain helpful to this day in the way it enables us to understand Assam and its environs.

In the examination of India's North East, it is imperative to transcend the intricate tapestry of socio-economic and political dynamics and engage in a comprehensive analysis of demographic, linguistic, and cultural factors. These constituent elements collectively confer a unique and discernible identity upon the inhabitants residing within delineated geographical boundaries. Within this regional purview, language, culture, and a collective consciousness of historical experiences emerge as pivotal components that intricately mold the ideological

underpinnings of regionalism. The linguistic facet, extending beyond mere communicative utility, assumes the role of a vessel preserving cultural heritage—safeguarding traditions, customs, and nuanced expressions indigenous to the region. Simultaneously, cultural elements function as threads interweaving the social fabric, fostering a shared sense of identity among the populace. Furthermore, the collective historical experiences embedded in the communal memory coalesce into a potent force propelling the development of an ideologically charged regionalism. Thus, it is through the interplay of language, culture, and historical narratives that a region in India's North East becomes infused with the fervor and distinctiveness characteristic of regional identity.

“There never was an ‘is’ without a ‘where’”, Lawrence Buell says. For Buell, both the good and the bad things happen to a human being and other life forms when their physical bodies are located somewhere—in a particular location or place. The more a site feels like a place, the more fervently it is so cherished, the greater the potential concern of its violation or even the possibility of violation. Place is a configuration of highly flexible subjective, social and material dimensions, and is not reducible to any of these. In John Agnew’s definition, place can be conceived as a matter of (social) ‘locale’, (geographical) ‘location’ and ‘sense of place’. It combines elements of nature, social relations and meaning (the mind, ideas, and symbols). Thus, the idea of a ‘home’ and a known ‘locale’ becomes extremely important for an individual to survive and a society to sustain. Homogeneity brings about a sense of a place and region and alienation in a supposed space of homogeneity provokes migration in certain cases.

In the realm of Mamang Dai's poetic expressions, her verses serve as a poignant manifestation of an individual's persistent pursuit for a sense of rootedness within a landscape that formerly epitomized her domicile. Her perspective transcends the superficial aspects of the locale, encompassing the profound cultural tapestry woven through time, the captivating narratives of folklore, the vibrancy inherent in the populace, and the resonating linguistic nuances. The erstwhile allure of this geographical expanse was not confined merely to the aesthetic grandeur of flourishing flora and expansive valleys; rather, it manifested as an inherent connection, a symbiotic interweaving of the denizens with their cherished environs. However, this allure has undergone a discernible metamorphosis. The once placid townships, the tranquil valleys, the sinuous river, and the luxuriant forests no longer epitomize bastions

of serenity. Rather, they have become unfortunate witnesses to the encroachment of discord and the pervasive inundation of unfamiliar countenances. Consequently, the erstwhile intimately shared space has been transmuted into a topography marked by discord and the palpable presence of interlopers. In the discerning prose of Mamang Dai, the poetic discourse not only encapsulates the extrinsic alterations in the physical milieu but also articulates the internal disquietude of an individual contending with the disconcerting transformation of a cherished homeland.

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