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Mamang Dai's Aspiration to Excavate Forgotten Marginalized Tribal's Identity Through the Novel *The Black Hill*

Dr. Umesh Vittalrao Kadu

Assistant Professor,
Shri Shivaji Arts and Commerce College, Amravati.

&

Sapana Ramkrushnarao Mahalle

Research Scholar,
Shri Shivaji Arts and Commerce College, Amravati.

Abstract:

Tribal's identity became more important question among the nation. Many authors tried to give voice to the tribal's identity, their culture and their literature. Mamang Dai is one of them who wished to give voice to the marginalized people's identity in the post-colonial India. Dai belongs to the Adi tribe therefore many of her works represent tribal's identity. Her latest 2017 Sahitya Akademi Award winner novel *The Black Hill* is one of the most important novels which develop the theme of identity against modernization and national integration. Throughout the novel Dai trying to preserve the tribal's roots in rapidly shifting world. *The Black Hill* represents the terror of history, the forgotten tales and fear for coming out of their Abor and Mishmee Hills. Dai gives a beautiful glimpse of switching situations and atmosphere of the places which makes the novel more interesting.

The present paper aims to represent the crises of identity of the tribal community while leaving in the remote places. How tribal survive, how they struggle for their existence, and how they come out of all the situations surrounded to them. The paper analyses the correlation between Dai's imagination and the hidden past it retraces the tribal history and culture. The paper aims to study the tribal's perspective, their struggle for existence, their issues of identity, their culture and their bleaker and dark side. It also reveals the relation between Abor and Mishmee people of Arunachal Pradesh and their relation with the migluns (British), their rich land, and their resistance against colonialism.

Keywords: Tribal's identity, culture, ethnicity, belonging, survival, struggle, post-colonial, marginalized indigenous, and existence.

**Introduction: -**

Mamang Dai is the most celebrated poet, novelist and journalist from the Arunachal Pradesh, India. Dai is the first woman from her state to be selected for IAS in 1979, but later she left the post to pursue her career in journalism. She received Padma Shri in 2011 from the Government of India. The Government of Arunachal Pradesh conferred her with the annual Verrier Elwin Prize in 2013 for *Arunachal Pradesh: The Hidden Land*. She received Sahitya Akademi Award in 2017 for her most famous novel *The Black Hill (2014)*, which is based on the recorded historical events of the journey of two French missionaries; Nicholas Michel Krick and Augustin Etienne Bourry who were engaged in a secret mission to set a church in Tibet.

The story of *The Black Hill* is set in mid-19th century a little before the 1857 mutiny in colonized north India with the introduction of Abor and Mishmee tribes who lives in different parts of upper Assam – the area below Tibet and above Brahmaputra. Tibet was forbidden land a place where many wanted to reach and convert themselves. The Novel revolves around the three characters Kajinsha, Gimur and Father Nicolas Krick. The story of the novel begins with Gimur who was from Abor tribe of Arunachal Pradesh, she falls in love and elopes with a Mishmee chief Kajinsha; a girl who once visited the Mebo village to solve the problems of border trespassing by the Migluns (British). The Migluns has made the tribal people to lose their good values, traditions and lands. But Abor and Mishmee people vows to protect their land, their culture and their good values at all cost to resist colonialism because they were able to govern themselves. The love story of Kajinsha and Gimur shows the confrontation between both the tribes but their resistance of British dominance which was upon Assam and Brahmaputra Valley for that they kill Father Krick and Augustine Bourry shows their unity. Dai writes about this novel that,

“There is another story from an unwritten past hidden beyond the mountain wall. I journey for many days to find it, and one day I come upon a black hill”
(Dai ix)

1. Historical Background: -

Nicholas Krick and Augustine Bourry were appointed for the Paris Foreign Mission an



institute of diocesan priests who spread out across the globe to promote Christianity to the fulfillment of their purpose Krick and Bourry wanted to reach Tibet. But at that time the only way to reach Tibet was through the northeast of India, present day Arunachal Pradesh. For that both were travel from Chennai to Kolkata and from there they reach to Arunachal Pradesh. On September 26, 1851, father Krick reached to Sadiya, a river island in Assam and from there he visited to Tibet. In July 22, 1853, father Bourry reach to Guwahati and met his superior father Krick. On February 19, 1854 both left Saikhowa for Tibet. But while on their final mission both were killed on August 2, 1854 by Kaisha a village chief of the Mishmi tribe at the Somme village in Lohit district which is near to Tibetan border. Father Felix Antony the social communication secretary of Miao Diocese in east Arunachal Pradesh observed that,

“Tibet and Christianity in Arunachal Pradesh have an age-old connection. French missionaries Nicholas Krick and Augustine Bourry were killed on their way to Tibet in 1854. They sowed the first seed of Christianity in Arunachal Pradesh 165 years ago before they were killed on August 2 the same year at the Tibet- Arunachal border region by a Mishmi Tribe chieftain.” (Arunachal: French Missionaries Krick and Bourry).

It is said that Krick was sick and Bourry was praying when Kaisha killed them by his machete. The Mishmi chief Kaisha was later captured and sentenced to death by hanging in Dibrugarh jail at Assam. Krick and Bourry’s mortal are still preserved and enshrined by the people of Somme Village. Tribe of the Arunachal Pradesh is thinking now to canonize the two priests. A prominent Catholic Boo from Tezu a Mishmi tribe town said that,

“We are happy to see the progress with the process of canonization. We pray that this day will remove the blot of saints we have acquired because of the killing by own tribe’s man 165 years ago” (Gomes).

This is a particular historical event running through Mamang Dai’s *The Black Hill*. The story of the novel is based on the recorded historical events of mid-nineteenth century Arunachal Pradesh at that time when the East India Company was making inroads in the north-eastern regions of India and the hostility and strong resistance meted out to them by native tribes to keep the migluns (British) out of their territories. All the tribes were firm on their



decision not to permit the white men into their territory. For that they were planning how to keep away white people from their land, their thinking about to protect their land was “The British may conquer the world but they will never take our land” (The Black Hill 25).

2. Narrative discourse of *The Black Hill*: -

Nicholas Krick, a priest from Lorraine wanted to rebel against boring and meaningless rituals of the church. He realized that, his congregation with God would come only through the path of love, service, suffering, and sacrifice. Krick was ambitious man and he determined to travel to the utmost ends of the earth, he wanted to cross the seas and continents to spread his religion and culture. He was selected by the Paris Foreign Missions Society on a Tibet mission and he decided to reach Tibet through the most dangerous route through the Mishmee Hills which goes from a southern route across the Himalayas through India. He was firm on his decision to fulfill the task of culture and religion extension. Soon, Krick boarded for the succession of his mission, after long days of voyage they reach to Madras into the Indian soil. In Madras the name of their mission changed from Tibet to Assam. For Assam mission the Krick and his team reached to Guwahati, here father Krick attracted by the tranquility of the place and serenity of the atmosphere, which is surrounded by the low hills, along with the flow of Brahmaputra River.

Krick started his venturing and exploratory journey through the tropical heat of Assam towns and Abor-Meshmee’s tribal areas. It was difficult for him to acclimatized with the atmosphere and manage with majority of population who speaks Assamese or Bengali. Language became the main barrier for him while communicating with the natives. But in spite of all the hindrances father Krick was firm on his resolution to undertake an exploratory journey which was going through Assam towns and the Abor and Meshmee hills at the foot of Himalayas which would take him to the Tibet. Emanating his way through the countryside and the luxuriant growth of the trees and grass Krick departed to pursue his dream and reach to the Lamas land. He planned to meet secretly to the Tribe who were living at the frontier of Assam and wanted to ask the way for the Tibet. But the Tribe’s people from the frontier found him suspected they thought that he is the colonial a white man wanted to venture into their land. The tribe was already fearful about white men’s behavior that these people would come to capture their territories. Because of their fear



about migluns all the tribe from the hills places the guard all along the frontier. But Krick thought that he is French by identity and not the white man and he was travelling with his cross and flute so no harm could happen with him the people would not be suspect him as a white he would be easily make his way to Tibet. So Krick kept travelling through the region where no McMahon line was. Before reaching to Tibet he travelled twice through the Assam and Abor-Meshmee Hill's territory. Krick and his colleagues were about to reach to their destination but someone informed them that the road which was going to Tibet was closed and they would have to go back. In spite of all the barriers he was firm on his decision to reach to Tibet so any situation came in front of him could not change his mind and might not affect him not even the fear of death could deter him from his mission. Krick kept travelling for to achieve his mission he decided to learn the native language so he could communicate easily with native people and could convince them about savior. While on a mission father Krick met to Kajinsha, Dai introduces their friendship with the warm words, "It was the start of something" (Black Hill 138). When they met language stood no hindrance between them both started to communicate in Assamese and Tibetan words. Kajinsha told the priest that he had went to Somme village for the trade and Krick also open up his thoughts with him about his mission. Dai states that, "And with every word and sentence exchanged, they understood each other better" (Black hill 139)

Along with the Krick's narrative one more story develops that is the love story of Gimur and Kajinsha which is dexterously woven by Dai. The arrival of the priest at the village of Mebo in Arunachal Pradesh as a part of Tibet Mission strongly resented the villagers because of that incident only they forbidden entry to the white men into their villages. Because villagers discovered that their purpose was to establish the trade at the hills of Mebo village. Villager's felt the strong indignation about the white men they thought that white people travelled up and down the country trying to enter into other people's land without any permission and vehemently got hold of respect from the natives. Because of that only villagers were annoyed about the white person, that's why they decided to trace the white men and abandon their entry into tribal villages. While on the mission of tracking the white people Kajinsha a native from a village of Mishmee hills reached to Abor and encounter with the seventeen-year-old Gimur. Gimur also got attracted towards the Kajinsha who belonged to the different clan and speaks different language. Gimur was aware



about the fact that if they got married she would have to leave her village and would have to settle at Kajinsha's town. Though the Abor villages are safer than the others where the rules of tradition were considered inviolable she knows the fact that she would not get the permission from her parents for their wedding. Gimur was aware about the consequences that her parents, relatives and villagers would not be agreeing her for the marriage with Kajinsha's whose family status; his background was unknown in Mebo to Gimur's family. That's why Gimur accepted the situation and were got ready to marry with Kajinsha and anticipate the reaction of her family members. Finally, Gimur flew with Kajinsha because she knows that their marriage would convert in to either war or abduction. She herself was unaware about her daring to start a new beginning with Kajinsha into the unknown, it was the unlikely reaction done by a tribal woman. Gimur and Kajinsha's together life started with the new beginning in the Black hill by the Dau River – a place near to the border with the Zayul valley of Tibet.

Though Gimur was not innocent and sophisticated but she was hardworking, submissive, assertive and deeply rooted in tradition. She was not struggling to come out in terms with modernity but bold enough to rebel against the norms of her tribe and accompany into the world of uncertainties. Dai puts the strange mystical relationship between Gimur and the Father Krick. Gimur unconsciously captivated towards the flute music of priest, "a clear, pure melody floating through the air, like someone urging the hills and trees to listen, and praying, waiting to hear if someone would answer" (Black hill 133). While travelling from the hills and playing his music on a flute Priest also felt the presence of someone he knows that she was Gimur who was silently watching and listening to his flute music calmly. Once Krick entered into the house of Kajinsha there he got a glimpse of Gimur's face and for no reason he got overwhelmed by the sense of joy and gratitude he felt like, "peace be in this house. God bless them. God bless this house". Father Krick felt a strong sympathy towards the woman in this house. Priest got bewildered about the thoughts coming in his mind about that unknown woman. He thwarts his mind from alien feelings which were disturbing him. His contemplation about Gimur was like, "He did not know why, except that he felt she needed watching over. Did he want to convert her? Did he sense something about this woman's heart knocking against her breast that found an echo in his own?" But, Gimur was only and only enjoying the pleasant music which was coming



through his flute, she had a high opinion about the priest she was unaware about all the mess going into the mind of Krick.

Gimur's happy marriage relationship came to an end when she caught her husband into an inebriated condition with another woman. Being a self-respected woman she could not accept her husband's relationship with another woman. After an appalling fight with Kajinsha she decided to go back to her own Mebo village. She lost her baby while crossing an overflowing stream. Gimur settled at Mebo with melancholy heart the separation of her husband and loss of her child was troubling her. Meantime while on a journey towards the mission Father Krick entered into the Mebo village he was desperate about his Tibet mission his entry into the Mebo was the culmination of his plan he wanted to search another route for reaching to Tibet avoiding Mishmee hills. Father Krick wanted to convince the Mebo tribe that he was the man of God so he started to heal the natives with the prayer that, "May God grant that by these bodily ministrations I can reach their souls" (Black Hill 187). At Mebo village Gimur once more got attracted towards the flute music of a priest she realized that the music which was coming from the flute of Krick was touching the chord of her mind. Gimur know that it was the love of Kajinsha which attracted her again. She realized that falling in love is not equal to any sin so she feels that she was not committing any kind of sin – "We are all created, all the offspring of Doni Polo, from the bat and the worm struggling to mate and breed, to man and woman, for this one purpose – to love. I am unfortunate, but I did nothing wrong" (Black Hill 180).

The arrival of the priest at Mebo changed the atmosphere of that landscape. When Gimur and priest mate they wanted to exchange their thoughts for each other both got closer by the bonds of sorrow and love. Priest wanted to offer his friendship to her so she could share her mind and suffering with him but her feelings and thoughts were always remaining hidden from him. He wanted to console her disturbed mind as he realized her grief. But he could not solace her muddle mind as she was by all setbacks of her life. Here at Mebo Krick was suspected as a spy of white men therefore villagers asked him to leave the village. Gimur and Krick's friendly relationship got cut short naturally. After priest had gone from the Mebo Gimur realized that she could not free herself from the memories of the priest. "She had no image of the land he came from. It was a blank space. But here in their



midst she had seen him as another *ami* – man...may be his eyes and nose, skin and cloths and the words he spoke were different; but she had found what was invisible; his heart, thoughts and needs were just like theirs” (Black Hill 194). With this mysterious state of mind and mixed feeling she went back to Kajinsha she left back all her rage and sorrow and they both grieved for the death of their son.

Krick realized that, he has to leave the Abor for reaching to Tibet; hence, he left Abor and march towards the Mishmee hills with his colleague Augustine Bourry, who was ill from six months after he left the Mebo. Krick was more passionate for Tibet, “I want to be there, to love and serve” (Black Hill 207). Father Krick and Bourry reached to Somme Village of Tibet both were happy for completion of their mission. After few days Krick’s health was not supporting him, he thought that all his efforts, works, and the desire for Christian Tibet was leaving him. He felt so drained that he thought he would die before establishing Tibet mission. He contemplates that building a church at Lassa in Tibet would ever be a dream for him. Because of the feeling of his own death he felt a strong desire to meet Kajinsha and the Kajinsha thought that the villagers wanted to get rid from the two priests. Gimur had a strange feeling that it was not safe for the priest to stay at the village as well as their staying at the village might harm Kajinsha. But before she could reach and mate the priest chief Lamet’s sharp sword touches the priest. Kajinsha’s attempt to save the priest by shooting down the Lamet was also failed. Dai beautifully portrayed the last meeting of Gimur and priest, when she reached to bleeding body of the priest he called her “aenjal” (Black Hill 246), she could not understand the word but Krick was so happy that Gimur arrived there at the time of his death. He opened his eyes and stared at her he was overwhelmed by the tender touch of her hands stroking his hair, - “Ah! Mother, sister, friend! Lost in the forests of Lorraine . . . they were all returning to him now” (Black Hill 247). Kajinsha and Gimur hide the priest’s body by grass at the hillside, where no one could detect it.

Kajinsha was aware that someday the clan’s men would come in search of priest’s murderer to Mishmee hills. After six years Lieutenant F. G. Eden reached to Mishmee hills in search of the murderer of two priests with few soldiers in disguise of white men they entered to catch the murderer, Kajinsha’s expectation turned out to be true. One night a



battalion of soldiers entered to grab the Kajinsha at dark Mishmee hills, Kajinsha pushed Gimur down a ridge to save her from the soldiers but before he could follow her he encountered with the soldiers. In a battle against the soldiers he overpowered and taken to the Debrooghur Jail in Assam. In a Combat with soldiers Kajinsha's many sons were killed and Gimur was unconsciously laid at the ridge. She only late came to know about Kajinsha's imprisonment, she tied the knife around her waist and went in search of Kajinsha around the black hills. Gimur went to meet Kajinsha at Debrooghur Jail where Kajinsha sentenced to death. When she stood in front of Kajinsha she reminded priest's flute music when he was having his dying breath; it was his death that had brought this curse on them. She was brought in conscious by the prison guard, fortifying for Kajinsha she plunged a knife into the throat of a prison guard who was trying to pull her away from Kajinsha. Kajinsha pleaded her to escape from the prison, "Go, go! Live for me! Live" (Black Hill 282). As he was taking towards the gallows he remembered Gimur's thoughts and priest' words which were intermixing in his mind that, "Sinner, shaman, priest, lama, legend, all mingled together with the secret that no would ever know, that all he had ever wanted was the desire to feel love" (Black Hill 286).

3. Identity Crises: -

Dai portrays the Northeastern struggle for their identity through the novel *The Black Hill* which is the story of Mebo, Somme, and many other tribal communities where Gimur, Kajinsha and Father Krick explored the implications of foreign settlements on the native land and on their psyche. Dai interconnects the land of the tribe with social identity where characters puts their strenuous efforts to preserve their land and their social identity. Korostelina defines social identity as,

"a feeling of belonging to a social group, as a strong connection with social category, and as an important part of our mind that affects our social perceptions and behavior" (2007: 15).

The Black Hill itself is the assertion and dignity in tribal identity. The world rapidly shifting towards the modernization which leads to the degradation of individual's identity and loss of the sense of belongingness. The character of Gimur is an example of cultural displacement who feels replaced and exile when she has actually supplanted herself at



Kajinsha's village which is totally new land for her. In the similar way, Krick also faces the issues related to his identity and belongingness, he has left his native place for the fulfillment of his dream and at another place he suffered for his own identity where he has to prove himself and had to go through the insult, attack and exploitation which pierce him. Northeastern struggle for their identity represented through the character of Kajinsha who continuously trying to preserve his culture and land from the migluns. Dai precisely puts the innocence of the Tribal people in Kajinsha's words when he was in a jail and pleaded for his escape to Gimur when she went to meet him in a jail that,

“Tell them about us, Kajinsha had said to Gimur that night in the jail. Tell them we were good. Tell them we also had some things to say. But we cannot read and write. So we tell stories” (Black Hill 288).

Conclusion: -

The human condition for Indigenous people is sometimes described as marginal, minority, and vulnerable. Yet Indigenous people have a distinctly full human experience defined by a deep sense of belonging to a place from which our people were created. (Bette Jacobs).

The Black Hill is not only recreating tribal's identity but also discuss about their culture and resistance towards the intruding white men who continuously trying to snatch their land from the villagers. Villagers thought that the loss of land leads to the loss of sense of belongingness; they depicted the land as a place of ownership and rest. Thus the paper concludes with the discussion of issues related to Northeastern tribal community's struggle for their identity, how they overcome from their trauma and the suffering and their struggle for their existence.

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