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## **Metaphorical Representation of Nature in *Small Towns and the River*, and *The Voice of the Mountain* by Mamang Dai: A Tribal Folklore**

**Rituparna Chatterjee**

Research Scholar,  
Government Vidarbha Institute of Science and Humanities, Amravati.

### **Abstract:**

Mamang Dai (February 23, 1957) from Arunachal Pradesh of North Eastern part of India is a poet, novelist, and a writer of non-fictional prose writing in English. She is the first woman to have been selected to the IAS/IFS from her state. She has pursued her career in journalism, and has become the President of Arunachal Pradesh Union of Working Journalists. She has also been involved with World Wide Fund for nature in the Eastern Himalaya Biodiversity Hotspots programme. Dai belonging to the Adi tribe has written mainly about the river, forest, and mountain which represent myth, and sacred memory of her home state. In several national and international platforms, she has devoted herself to focus on the disappearing traditions of her state when modernity actively started to knock at the door. She has used her personal knowledge to talk about the customs and beliefs of her people through her imagination and creativity in her writings. In most of her poems, hills and rivers are used as metaphors of the implicit, hidden, and rich culture of Arunachal Pradesh. At the same time, hills and mountains have metaphorical implications at three levels - physical, emotional and as a way of identity. *River Poems* was her first publication which made her one of the representative voices from her region. Her poem, *Small Towns and the River* is a part of this collection where the images of small towns, rivers and gorge reflect her proximity to her birthplace. Along with this poem, *The Voice of the Mountain* is of the mountain, the very spirit of the poet's existence. In this paper the belief, customs, mind, and rituals of Adi tribe will be exemplified through Mamang Dai's two poems *Small Towns and the River* and *The Voice of the Mountain*.

**Keywords:** Adi tribe, nature, customs and rituals, and folklore.



A British writer William John Thomas in the year 1846 has first coined the term ‘folklore’ which has been derived from the German word *Volklehre* meaning people’s customs. Folklore, an oral tradition, indicates local narratives and linguistic conventions. Oral narratives may not be historically authentic, but have been transmitted from one generation to the other, getting influenced by history. Indian folktales are very attractive to every generation for their simple approach, and tribal populations are mentioned even in Indian epics like *Ramayana* and *Mahabharata* where they are mentioned as ‘Jana’, meaning different in physical appearance, using languages, worshiping God's, and living in isolated regions. Poetries from Northeast India stand as representatives of their entire community, and Mamang Dai is not exceptional in this context. Mamang Dai (February 23, 1957), belonging to the Adi tribe, uses her personal experience, wisdom, and knowledge of her people alongwith their culture, and beliefs in order to go back to her roots. As she is in search of her roots, she tries her best to preserve the tribal lores when modernisation starts to knock at the door. Dai mentions the obstacles faced by the indigenous population residing on the Seven Sisters Mountain. She comes from seven sister states of India, Arunachal Pradesh – Itanagar. The other seven sister states are Assam – Dispur, Manipur – Imphal, Nagaland – Kohima, Meghalaya – Shillong, Tripura – Agartala, Mizoram – Aizawl. Mamang Dai discusses the voiceless and ‘subaltern’ inhabitants of the seven sister mountains in her poetry who were regarded as a subordinate tribe (Antonio Francesco Gramsci first used the term subaltern in *Notes on Italian History* (1947), published in *Prison Notebook*). Pramod K. Nayar mentions, “Colonial discourse masks the power relations between races, cultures and nations. It makes the relations seem natural, scientific and objective. Colonial discourse therefore produces stereotypes from within European prejudices, beliefs and myths” (Nayar, *Colonial Voices: The Discourses of Empire*). When Nayar talks about the point black truth of the political strategies of processing of ‘othering’ of the non-west, then Bipin Patsani praises the logical quality of Mamang Dai in both her *River Poems* (2004) and *The Legends of Pensam* (2006) where she has perfectly blended the myth and history of the tribe of Adis of Siang valley that spans Arunachal Pradesh and Tibet: “In our language the word ‘pensam’ means ‘in-between’. It suggests the middle, or middle ground, but it may also be interpreted as the hidden spaces of the heart where a secret garden grows” (Dai, *The Legends of Pensam*). The life of Adi tribes is really conflicted because they have to live their lives between myth and reality under the compulsion of the transitional phase from traditionalism to modernism, and the word ‘pensam’ is literally the middle-ground of their life. In this text the



fall of a little boy Hoxo from the sky and how he has been saved by Lutor have been the central area of arguments. After 3 years when Lutor has returned the boy to the villagers by creating some imaginary stories, the tribe accepts that even without making a simple question. This is the point that makes a fascinating ride over tribal beliefs, their lives and customs into disarray. Mamang Dai in her poems has exemplified tribal myth in order to make us realise the discriminated state between mainstream and tribal life. Being extremely proud of her tribal origin once in an interview with Ananya Guha She declares “*I am a tribal, and the geography, landscape, our myths, stories; all this has shaped my thoughts. I feel fortunate that I never forgot my mother tongue- Adi...I am particularly influenced by our oral narratives dealing with creation myths...*”(Guha,*The Phenomenal Woman*). Mamang Dai’s books include: *Arunachal Pradesh: The Myth of Tranquility* (non-fiction, 2003/2009); *The Legends of Pensam* (novel, 2006); *The Sky Queen and Once Upon a Moontime* (illustrated folklore for young readers, 2003); *Stupid Cupid* (novel, 2008); *Mountain Harvest: The Food of Arunachal* (non-fiction, 2004); *River Poems* (2004); *The Black Hill* (novel, 2014); and so on.

The Sanskrit meaning of Arunachal Pradesh is ‘The Land of the Dawn Lit Mountains’ because in our whole country Arunachal Pradesh receives the first sun kissed morning. Arunachal Pradesh has a kind of hidden and rich culture where hills, rivers, and mountains are metaphorical representations of Physical existence, emotional survival, and a way of identity of their people. Mamang Dai in an interview with Nilanshu Agarwal comments that according to the practiced belief of Adi community everything related to nature (rocks, stones, trees, rivers, hills) has life, and she focuses on the concept called Donyi- Polo (Donyi- Sun, and Polo- moon as the symbols of a supreme deity) which is quite similar to the ancient Indian philosophy (Agarwal, *Fusion of Journalism and Poetry*). According to Mamang Dai, in Arunachal Pradesh we can see the original form of indigenous faith but due to the historical solitude of the place very little information can reach the ear of mainstream society (Dai, *Arunachal Pradesh- The Myth of Tranquility*). Apart from the natural beauties, rivers and hills, Arunachal Pradesh is also a perfect place for different tribes and this is an inherent beauty of Mamang Dai’s poetry. Here in *The Voice of the Mountain*, and *Small Towns and the River* by Mamang Dai the metaphorical representation of nature will be analysed from the perspective of tribal belief.



The poem *The Voice of the Mountain* is all about mountains about which the very existence of the poet revolves. The mountain being mysterious gets a kind of uniqueness of distance, and invisibility because of mist from the society called mainland just like the north-eastern states from the National territory. In the changing scenario when the socio-political ambience is taking a U-turn, then trees, mountains, and rivers only can provide the food for human love as well as mental peace. According to Mamang Dai, the great forest, the rivers, the mountains, and the environment are responsible to frame the belief system of the Adi tribe (Dai, *The Nature of Faith and Worship* among the Adis). The mountains relate to the traditional values of the land, and they can recreate the past as well. Mamang Dai has complete knowledge of the painful situation of those who dwell atop the mountain.

*“We live in territories forever ancient and new, and as we speak in changing languages.*

*I, also, leave my spear leaning by the tree and try to make a sign.*

*I am an old man sipping the breeze that is forever young.*

*In my life I have lived many lives.”* (Dai, *The Voice of the Mountain*). According to tribal belief, Mountains epitomise within themselves the living oracle of past, present, and the future by recalling our history. The mountain is presented here as an omniscient narrator to be all-knowing about the towns, the estuary mouth and the bank of the river. Mountains witness all the changes in the society because of its ancient root and that's why the poetic voice takes the responsibility to speak for the mountain: *"I am the chance syllable that orders the world Instructed with history and miracles"* (Dai, *The Voice of the Mountain*). Change is the fundamental truth of any progression but when the transformation intends to take place by erasing the tribal culture then the poet takes her pen to register tribal culture permanently in her poems. In the concluding part of the poem, the mountain experiences the weeping of men and women with the advent of new civilization, they constantly pine for assurance and assistance from the government but they never get any. Mamang Dai along with her fellow people yearn for peace, but they realise after a certain point of time that their life will not be free from hardship and struggle and *'peace is falsity'* (Dai, *The Voice of the Mountain*). They are cornered and marginalised by the elite section of the society, even the Government is really indifferent towards them after receiving revenues from them. Mamang Dai mentions a youth who, being unable to talk, has brought a fish as an offering to the



mountain spirit following his belief that if the mountain feels sorry for him, he would return his voice. Through the representation of the man and his offerings to the mountain the poet here evokes the traditional tribal values of the area, and moreover making a strange comparison between mountains and the Government Mamang Dai highlights the oppression of Northeasterners and the sufferings in their unheard voice. The title of the poem *The Voice of the Mountain* highlights the forced voicelessness of tribal people by mainstream culture and here the poet raises her voice to speak for her own tribe as mountains are the collective psyche of the people of Arunachal Pradesh. Arundhuti Subramaniam states, "*For all its simplicity, Dai's poetry does not arrive at easy conclusions. There is no dishonest sense of anchor here, no blissful pastoral idyll. The poet describes her people as "foragers for a destiny" and her work is pervaded by a deep unease about erased histories and an uncertain future...*" (Subhramaniam, *The Land as Living Presence*).

In her poem, *Small Towns and the River* too, Mamang Dai talks about the presence of the mountain, but the main symbol of the poem is the river. The poem describes the speaker's journey through small towns along a river, observing the lives of people and the landscape. The speaker reflects on the towns' isolation, the river's significance, and the impact of modernization. Here we can witness the poet depicting the mourning of people who have lost their loved ones, and she further mentions some of the tribal beliefs of the soul's journey towards heaven by giving instances of placing the dead with their head pointing Westwards as according to Adi community the dead bodies are reborn and the bodies of their dead people should be kept with the heads directed to the west. They believe when these bodies come into existence, they will move towards the east and as the sun rises in the east, it has a positive association. The poem captures the concern of the poet about the problematic life existing in the 'small Towns' of Arunachal Pradesh beside a river referring to Pasighat, the hometown of the poetess through which it passes. The North- East region has experienced a long battle of political tensions for a prolonged period of time, and conflicts between the Central Government and the states, and on the other hand between the natives and the migrants from other parts of India led to massive bloodshed. In this poem the poet has compared the permanence of the river to the decaying life of human beings as they are mortals: "*the river knows / the immortality of water*" (Dai, *Small Towns and the River*). She further mentions that life and death both are transient but only rituals are permanent.

*"Just the other day someone died..."*



*Life and death, life and death,*

*only the rituals are permanent” (Dai, *Small Towns and the River*).*

The metaphorical representation of the title *Small Towns and the River* symbolises the river as a symbol of change, continuity, and sustainability, which is reminiscent of the sacred rivers of tribal culture, and the small town as a metaphor for the

close-knit tribal societies. people, nature, and culture to highlight the conflict between traditional belief of the Adi tribe, and the concept of modernisation. The poem finally ends on an optimistic note by erasing the conflict to take a strong stand in favour of their tradition, rituals, and spiritual beliefs:

*“In small towns by the river*

*We all want to walk with the gods” (Dai, *Small Towns and the River*).*

In his Nobel prize-winning speech Walcott mentions an incident of watching a performance of the Ramleela in Trinidad: “...*Two different religions, two different continents, both filling the heart with the pain that is joy” (Walcott, *The Antilles: Fragments of Epic Memory*).* The pain interpreted by Walcott is the pain of having a fragmented identity which is also a joy because of a celebration of a hybrid, multicultural existence. Critics have questioned over the time again and again about the Northeastern writer’s choice of writing in English on tribal issues. For the Northeastern writers spreading their traditional experiences is a way more important than considering English as the language of the oppressors. Mamang Dai, like Derek Walcott and other postcolonial poets, is very much clear about her agenda and that's why doesn't divert herself at the time of choosing her language for her poetry. Apart from the Northeastern landscape illustrated in her poetry she also draws our attention to the power relation between man and nature in a capitalist patriarchy. Mamang Dai makes an ecocritical reading of tribal reality and tells the dilemma of introducing modernity to a society based on coexistence with nature in her above mentioned two poems. Dai’s poetry doesn't have only picturesque quality, rather her poems *The Voice of the Mountain, and Small Towns and the River* keeps switching between the process of modernisation (movement) and traditional beliefs (stillness), and in order to preserve the culture and identity of Adi tribe of Northeast she glorifies memory and oral tradition. Mamang Dai in an interview with Jaydeep Sarangi mentions: “*Certainly I am influenced by the oral narratives. Knowing the stories gives me*



*a sense of identity. It inspires my writing – after all it is a world of myth, memory, and imagination. Oral narratives are generally perceived as a simple recounting of tales for a young audience but I think their significance lies in the symbols embedded in the stories about the sanctity of life, about what makes us human. My response to myths/stories is akin to a quest. It is a worldview I am still exploring.”*

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