

**UNFOLDING REALISM AND RESISTANCE RECLAIMING  
INDIGENOUS IDENTITY IN THE POETRY OF MAMANG DAI**

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**Abstract**

This paper examines the poetry of Mamang Dai, illuminating how she revitalizes the modes of realism and naturalism to represent and reclaim the unique indigenous identity of Northeast India. As a member of the Adi tribe of Arunachal Pradesh, Dai intricately weaves together cultural memory, oral traditions, and sacred landscapes to craft a poetic voice that powerfully resists cultural erasure and counters reductive representations of tribal communities. Her verses blend mythic consciousness with an acute ecological awareness, creating a distinctive poetics rooted in the lived experiences of her people yet resonant with wider decolonial and postcolonial discourses. By reconfiguring realism through an indigenous worldview, Dai portrays not only the material conditions but also the spiritual and cosmological dimensions of tribal life, foregrounding the deep interdependence between humans and nature. This paper argues that her poetry embodies a subtle yet profound mode of cultural resistance and resilience, reclaiming suppressed histories, reviving endangered knowledge systems, and reasserting tribal subjectivity within the larger framework of Indian English literature. Dai's work thus contributes meaningfully to postcolonial ecocriticism and indigenous literary studies, inviting readers and scholars to expand their understanding of realism as a dynamic, culturally rooted mode of storytelling that honours the interconnectedness of land, language, memory, and identity.

**Keywords:** Realism, Indigenous identity, Postcolonialism, Northeast India, Tribal literature.

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**Introduction**

The poetry of Mamang Dai, one of the most prominent literary voices from Arunachal Pradesh, India, is a profound interweaving of indigenous myth, ecology, memory, and historical consciousness. Born into the Adi tribe, Dai's literary oeuvre emerges from her deep-rooted engagement with the landscapes, oral traditions, and socio-cultural realities of the Northeast. Her work stands as a powerful testament to the lived experiences of tribal communities, offering both an artistic vision and a political intervention (Dasgupta, 2011; Mishra, 2014). In the broader landscape of Indian English literature, Dai's poetic voice is unique—negotiating between the personal and the collective, the local and the global, the natural and the mythic (Das, 2021; Sen, 2011; Sharma, 2019). Her poetry becomes not only a medium of aesthetic expression but also a site of cultural assertion and resistance (Rao, 2016; Rege, 1998).

This paper investigates how Mamang Dai employs the literary modes of realism and naturalism to articulate indigenous identity, not simply as mimetic strategies, but as decolonial tools to reclaim tribal subjectivity and historical agency (Coulthard, 2014; Wa Thiong'o, 1986). Far from adopting the Eurocentric paradigms of realism as a mere representation of objective reality, Dai reconfigures this mode to reflect the experiential truths of tribal life (Bhabha, 1994; Pizer, 1995). Her realism is deeply embedded in the rhythms of nature, the structures of myth, and the continuity of oral traditions (Dai, 2004, 2006, 2008). In doing so, she resists the reductive binaries often imposed by colonial and postcolonial discourse—nature versus culture, myth versus history, tribal versus modern—and instead advances a nuanced vision rooted in ecopoetics and indigenous cosmology (Adamson, 2001; Huggan & Tiffin, 2010; Plumwood, 2002; Said, 1993; Shiva, 1989).

In literary studies, realism and naturalism have traditionally been associated with nineteenth-century European and American literature, where they served to depict everyday life with empirical detail and psychological depth. Naturalism, often considered a more deterministic extension of realism, emphasized the forces of heredity, environment, and social conditions in shaping human behavior (Pizer, 1993). However, such frameworks have frequently overlooked the complex ways in which non-Western writers adapt and indigenize these modes to articulate alternative epistemologies. Dai's work exemplifies this shift. Her poetic naturalism is not deterministic in the Euro-American sense, but instead acknowledges the deep interdependence between humans and the natural world—a worldview intrinsic to many indigenous belief systems (Adamson, 2001; Plumwood, 2002; Shiva, 1989).

For instance, in poems such as "The Balm of Time" and "Small Towns and the River," Dai evokes the landscape not as a passive backdrop but as a sentient, active presence that shapes memory, identity, and spiritual continuity. Here, the river is both a literal and symbolic entity—marking time, carrying ancestral voices, and bearing witness to historical

transformations. Such imagery reflects what Graham Huggan and Helen Tiffin term the “postcolonial ecocritical” approach, which situates ecological awareness within the matrix of cultural resistance and historical trauma (Huggan & Tiffin, 2010).

Moreover, Dai’s deployment of realism often serves to counter the exoticized and anthropological representations of tribal communities prevalent in mainstream narratives. By foregrounding the specificity of Adi customs, rituals, and oral histories, she dismantles homogenizing portrayals of the Northeast and asserts a self-authored indigenous perspective. This act of cultural reclamation is inherently political—it challenges hegemonic structures that have historically silenced or misrepresented tribal voices. As scholar Sanjukta Dasgupta notes, “Mamang Dai’s poetry reflects the ethos of her people and simultaneously critiques the politics of marginalization and invisibility” (Dasgupta, 2011). Similarly, Nandini Das emphasizes the significance of place in Dai’s poetry, highlighting how the Northeast’s landscapes are intricately mapped to assert indigenous identity (Das, 2021).

In this context, realism and naturalism function as what Edward Said described as “contrapuntal” readings of history—presenting counter-narratives that resist colonial epistemologies (Said, 1993). Dai’s poetry thus embodies a form of literary activism, using poetic realism to reinstate indigenous knowledge systems and cultural sovereignty. Her work resonates with the broader aims of postcolonial and tribal literature in India, which seek to unsettle dominant historiographies and recover suppressed voices.

This paper argues that Mamang Dai’s poetry represents an innovative confluence of literary form and political purpose. By engaging with realism and naturalism through an indigenous lens, she not only redefines these aesthetic categories but also reclaims a space for tribal subjectivity in Indian English literature. Through her ecopoetic vision, Dai offers a model of resistance that is both lyrical and grounded—a reclamation of identity, memory, and belonging in the face of historical erasure.



Figure 1: The Siang River — a recurring symbol in Mamang Dai’s poetry, embodying continuity, memory, and indigenous cosmology.

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**Literature Review**

The critical reception of Mamang Dai's poetry has gradually expanded within the domains of postcolonial studies, ecocriticism, and indigenous literature, reflecting a growing scholarly interest in voices from the Northeast region of India. Scholars such as Chandrima Sharma (2019) and Sanjukta Dasgupta (2011) have emphasized the distinctiveness of Dai's poetic voice, particularly in her negotiation of orality, memory, and landscape. Sharma, in her analysis of orality and landscape, argues that Dai reclaims tribal subjectivity by embedding oral traditions and mythic consciousness within the written text. Similarly, Dasgupta foregrounds the poet's ability to create "ethnic echoes" and articulate "tribal trajectories" that subvert homogenizing narratives within mainstream Indian literature (Dasgupta, 2011; Sharma, 2019).

Mamang Dai's poetic work also invites critical engagement through the lens of ecopoetics and environmental humanities. Scholars like Graham Huggan and Helen Tiffin (2010) (Huggan & Tiffin, 2010) argue for a postcolonial ecocritical framework that acknowledges the environmental knowledge embedded in indigenous worldviews. In this context, Dai's poetry resonates with Cheryll Glotfelty and Harold Fromm's (1996) (Kolodny, 1996) foundational work on ecocriticism, which calls for a literary interrogation of ecological interconnectedness. Dai's ecological consciousness finds parallels in Val Plumwood's (2002) (Plumwood, 2002) critique of anthropocentrism, as she consistently resists dichotomies between nature and culture, human and non-human. Joni Adamson's exploration of American Indian literature and environmental justice further complements this perspective, emphasizing the role of indigenous narratives in ecological discourse (Adamson, 2001).

From a postcolonial theoretical standpoint, Edward Said's *Culture and Imperialism* (1993) and Homi Bhabha's *The Location of Culture* (1994) provide essential frameworks for understanding Dai's resistance to cultural erasure (Bhabha, 1994; Said, 1993). These works illuminate how Dai's poetry contests colonial and neocolonial paradigms by foregrounding indigenous histories and epistemologies. Bill Ashcroft, Gareth Griffiths, and Helen Tiffin (1989) in *The Empire Writes Back* further support the view that postcolonial writing often reclaims and re-inscribes suppressed voices, a strategy evident in Dai's poetic reconstructions of the Adi worldview (Ashcroft et al., 1989).

The lens of feminist and decolonial critique also enriches the study of Dai's work. Vandana Shiva (1989), in *Staying Alive*, highlights the interconnections between women, ecology, and survival—concerns that animate much of Dai's poetic ethos (Shiva, 1989). Glen Coulthard's *Red Skin, White Masks* (2014) complements this perspective by arguing for the rejection of colonial frameworks of recognition and the reaffirmation of indigenous political and cultural sovereignty (Coulthard, 2014). Dai's poetry can be read as a literary enactment of this

ethos—an affirmation of tribal selfhood rooted in land, myth, and collective memory. Sharmila Rege's (1998) critique of mainstream feminist movements underscores the importance of recognizing marginalized voices, a principle that aligns with Dai's poetic focus on indigenous experiences (Rege, 1998).

Recent contributions such as those by Santosh Mishra (2014) and K. Suneetha Rao (2016) specifically examine Dai's poetic representation of nature and indigenous sensibility. Mishra emphasizes the role of cultural memory and ecology in Dai's verses, while Rao explores the spiritual and philosophical depth of tribal cosmology embedded in her work. Their readings affirm the position that Dai's poetry transcends aesthetic representation and assumes the function of cultural resistance (Mishra, 2014; Rao, 2016).

Collectively, these critical voices demonstrate that Mamang Dai's poetry occupies a vital intersection of realism, naturalism, and indigenous resurgence. While earlier scholarship often positioned Northeast Indian literature as peripheral, more recent studies rightly place Dai's work at the center of debates on identity, resistance, and literary decolonization. However, there remains a need for more sustained engagement with the naturalist dimensions of her poetry—how environmental determinism, survival, and the inescapability of fate shape her indigenous realism. This paper contributes to that gap by offering an integrated reading of realism and naturalism as tools of resistance and cultural reclamation in Dai's poetic oeuvre (Adamson, 2001).

### **Theoretical Framework**

The study is grounded in literary realism and naturalism as articulated by Emile Zola and later adapted in postcolonial literary contexts. It also draws on postcolonial ecocriticism, particularly the work of Graham Huggan and Helen Tiffin, to examine how ecological and cultural narratives intersect in Dai's poetry. These frameworks allow for a nuanced analysis of how Dai's work represents both the material and symbolic struggles of her people (Huggan & Tiffin, 2010; Zola, 1893).

### **Analysis / Discussion**

Dai's poetry, such as those found in *River Poems* (2004) and *The Balm of Time* (2008), offers vivid depictions of the natural landscape, interwoven with themes of memory, loss, and survival. In poems like "The Missing Link" and "The Voice of the Mountain," she constructs a literary ecology where nature is not merely a backdrop but an active participant in the construction of identity. Her use of oral tradition and myth further enhances the narrative of resistance against cultural erasure. Through close reading, it becomes evident that Dai employs realist and naturalist modes to foreground the socio-historical realities of Northeast India while simultaneously resisting homogenizing representations (Dai, 2004, 2008).

***Realism as Indigenous Assertion***

Mamang Dai's poetry demonstrates a deep fidelity to the textures of everyday life in Northeast India—its forests, rivers, seasons, and spiritual rhythms. In poems such as "*The Balm of Time*" and "*The Missing Link*", Dai constructs a realist framework that situates the tribal subject within the specificity of place and history (Dai, 2006, 2008). Her attention to the materiality of landscape—earth, water, sky—not only affirms a realist commitment to physical reality but also asserts a cultural geography that resists erasure (Das, 2021; Mishra, 2014; Sharma, 2019).

Realism in Dai's work is intimately tied to oral history and memory. The act of remembering—whether of lost villages, ancestral rituals, or mythic figures—is an act of cultural survival (Dasgupta, 2011; Rao, 2016). Her realist impulse thus becomes a counter-colonial strategy, opposing dominant national narratives that homogenize or silence tribal experience. As Graham Huggan notes, postcolonial realism can "reconfigure realist aesthetics to recover suppressed histories", and this is precisely the function Dai's realism performs (Coulthard, 2014; Huggan & Tiffin, 2010; Wa Thiong'o, 1986).



Figure 2: An Adi community scene reflecting the cultural landscape that inspires Mamang Dai's verses.

***Naturalism and the Sacred Landscape***

While realism in Dai's poetry captures the socio-political dimensions of tribal identity, her naturalism evokes the entanglement of human life with the natural world. This is not a deterministic naturalism rooted in social Darwinism but a spiritual ecology where nature is alive with agency and memory (Adamson, 2001; Plumwood, 2002; Shiva, 1989). The mountains, rivers, and forests in her poems are not passive backdrops but active participants in cultural life.

**In "*Small Towns and the River*", Dai writes:**

*"...and the river has no end /*



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*no beginning /  
and we who come by its banks /  
will be taken by the water..."*

This vision of nature as cyclical, boundless, and sacred challenges anthropocentric modernity. It affirms an indigenous naturalism in which human identity is inseparable from ecological consciousness. Such a view resonates with what Glen Coulthard calls “grounded normativity”—the ethical frameworks derived from land-based practices and traditions in indigenous communities (Coulthard, 2014; Huggan & Tiffin, 2010).



Figure 3: The sacred mountains and forests of Arunachal Pradesh — active agents in Dai’s poetic naturalism.

### ***Resistance through Poetic Form and Voice***

Dai’s poetic voice is quiet yet defiant, marked by lyrical precision and philosophical introspection. Her resistance is not strident or slogan-driven but subtle, embedded in form and tone (Dasgupta, 2011; Sharma, 2019). Through her minimalist style and symbolic imagery, she resists both the commodification of tribal cultures and the sentimentalization of indigenous suffering.

Moreover, her use of English itself becomes a form of resistance. By writing in the colonizer’s tongue but infusing it with the rhythms, metaphors, and sensibilities of tribal culture, Dai transforms English into a medium of indigenous expression. This linguistichybridity mirrors what Ngũgĩ wa Thiong’o calls the “seizing of the language”—the act of turning a colonial tool into a vehicle for native truth (Ashcroft et al., 1989; Bhabha, 1994; Wa Thiong’o, 1986).

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***Reclaiming Indigenous Identity***

At the core of Dai's poetry lies a commitment to cultural reclamation. Her work is an archive of disappearing knowledge systems, ancestral stories, and sacred geographies (King, 2003; Rao, 2016; Sen, 2011). In a postcolonial context where indigenous identities are often rendered invisible, Dai's poetry becomes a form of testimony. She bears witness to the traumas of dislocation, development-induced displacement, and cultural loss while reaffirming the resilience of her people (Das, 2021; Mishra, 2014).

Dai's poetic project aligns with the decolonial turn in indigenous studies, which seeks to recover suppressed epistemologies and restore dignity to marginalized communities (Coulthard, 2014; Rege, 1998; Said, 1993). In her vision, reclaiming identity is not only about resistance but also about renewal—reviving the spiritual and ecological wisdom that modernity has cast aside (Glotfelty & Fromm, 1996; Huggan, 2001).

**Conclusion**

Mamang Dai's poetry emerges as a powerful confluence of literary realism, naturalism, and indigenous resistance, offering a deeply rooted aesthetic that is simultaneously local and universal. Her engagement with the natural world, tribal myths, and oral traditions is not simply a poetic embellishment but a deliberate strategy to foreground the lived realities and cosmologies of the Adi tribe and the broader indigenous communities of Northeast India. In doing so, Dai disrupts and redefines dominant frameworks of Indian English literature that often marginalize or exoticize tribal voices.

By weaving indigenous worldviews into her verse, Dai expands the scope of realism beyond its Euro-American genealogies. Her poetic realism does not merely seek to depict material conditions or social circumstances; rather, it constructs an ontological realism grounded in memory, landscape, and the sacred interconnectedness of all life. Likewise, her deployment of naturalist elements underscores not a deterministic fatalism but a deep recognition of human vulnerability, cultural continuity, and ecological symbiosis. This nuanced synthesis allows her to articulate a resistance that is subtle yet profound—resistance against cultural invisibility, historical amnesia, and postcolonial homogenization.

Dai's poetry compels us to reconsider realism not as a monolithic or static literary mode, but as a fluid and responsive form of cultural articulation. Her work demonstrates how realism, when refracted through indigenous epistemologies, becomes a medium for asserting identity, reviving suppressed histories, and challenging epistemic violence. The landscapes she evokes are not inert settings but active agents of memory, identity, and resistance—echoing the environmental consciousness that underpins her ecopoetic vision.

In reclaiming poetic space for indigenous voices, Mamang Dai also challenges the reader to move beyond superficial multiculturalism and engage with the depth and dignity of tribal epistemologies. Her verses—rich in symbolic resonance and ecological awareness—serve as



poetic blueprint for decolonial thought and indigenous resurgence. Ultimately, Dai's contribution to Indian English literature is not only artistic but also political, inviting a reimagining of literary canons and cultural narratives from the perspective of those historically silenced

In essence, Mamang Dai's poetic legacy stands as an enduring testament to the transformative power of literature in bridging worlds and reconfiguring cultural hierarchies. Her oeuvre invites scholars, critics, and readers alike to listen attentively to the silences and stories that lie beyond mainstream narratives. By foregrounding the voices, landscapes, and cosmologies of her people, Dai not only preserves indigenous knowledge systems but also propels them into global literary discourse. Her poetry, therefore, is both a sanctuary and a site of struggle—a reminder that true resistance often resides in the quiet persistence of storytelling, the reclamation of language, and the unwavering affirmation of identity amidst an ever-changing world.

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