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Landscape as Sacred Archives of Memory and Indigenous Eco-Spirituality in Mamang Dai's Selected Poems

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Abstract:
The paper titled "Landscape as Sacred Archives of Memory and Indigenous Eco-Spirituality in Mamang Dai's Selected Poems" examines how Mamang Dai's selected poems portray nature as a living and sacred archive that preserves indigenous cultural memory and eco-spirituality. Drawing upon the concepts of indigenous eco-spirituality and cultural memory, the study highlights how Dai interweaves animism, folklore, and a sense of belonging to challenge modern notions of development. In her selected poems, natural elements such as the sky, earth, water, trees, and mountains are not merely passive backdrops but active forces that shape culture, heritage, morality, history, memory, and rebirth. The paper concludes that Dai's poetry underscores the inseparable relationship between spirituality and ecological preservation.

Keywords: Mamang Dai; Indigenous Eco-Spirituality; Cultural Memory; Sacred Landscape; Ecocriticism.

Introduction:

Mamang Dai is a distinguished poet, journalist, and novelist from the North East of India, widely recognized for her literary and ecological contributions rooted in Arunachal Pradesh. Her works foreground cultural identity, oral traditions, and myths of the region, drawing deeply from her Adi tribal heritage. Though she was the first woman from her region to be selected for the Indian Administrative Service, Dai chose journalism and creative writing as her vocation, contributing to prominent newspapers such as *The Telegraph*, *Hindustan Times*, and *The Sentinel*, and later serving as President of the Arunachal Pradesh Union of Working Journalists. Her engagement with environmental advocacy includes work with the World Wide Fund for Nature (WWF) in the Eastern Himalaya Biodiversity Hotspots programme. Dai has been honoured with several prestigious awards, including the Verrier Elwin Award, the Sahitya Akademi Award, and the Padma Shri.

Dai's literary corpus includes *Arunachal Pradesh: The Hidden Land* (2009), *The Legends of Pensam* (2006), *The Sky Queen and Once Upon a Moontime* (2003), *Stupid Cupid* (2008), *Mountain Harvest: The Food of Arunachal* (2004), *River Poems* (2004), *The Black Hill* (2014), *Hambreelsai's Loom* (2014), *El bálsamo del tiempo / The Balm of Time* (2008), and *Midsummer Survival Lyrics* (2014). Across these works, nature emerges not merely as a backdrop but as a living, spiritual force that sustains cultural identity and collective memory. Her writing includes multiple genres—poetry, fiction, non-fiction, and mythic retellings, but she follows a consistent ecological and spiritual vision rooted in Adi cosmology.

Dai's prose works like *The Legends of Pensam* and *The Black Hill* treats the landscape as a narrative agent that influences the story, characters and the morality they follow. Her poetry like *River Poems* and *Midsummer Survival Lyrics* follows a different style where she employs a vision of loss, rebirth and belonging. Her non-fiction works, on the other hand like, *Arunachal Pradesh: The Hidden Land* and *Mountain Harvest*, document indigenous and ecology which includes food, ritual, cultural practices. The only work where she uses a different theme is her novel, *Stupid Cupid*, where she deals with urban alienation. But even then, she uses images of call from the hills, where she suggests that distance from nature causes trouble. Through her diverse works, Dai builds a eco-spiritual view where natural components like land, water, and wind contribute to cultural memory.

Dai's poetry is celebrated for its profound affinity with the natural world. She does not simply describe nature; she intertwines it with spirituality, identity, and a sense of belonging. Her thematic concerns include tribal culture, animism, political history, shifting landscapes, and cultural heritage. In many of her poems, there is a palpable longing to restore nature to its original purity—a desire that reflects both ecological concern and spiritual yearning.

Mountains and rivers function as primary agents in her works, embodying both mystical and realistic dimensions of the natural world. Dai's poetic vision aligns with the three components of nature connectedness identified by P. W. Schultz: cognitive (knowledge and understanding of nature), affective (emotional bond with nature), and behavioural (actions that reflect care for nature). Her poems present nature as a living spiritual archive that preserves indigenous identity and cultural memory, resisting the erasure brought about by modernization and environmental degradation.

This paper examines how Mamang Dai's selected poems—"Gone," "No Dream," "The Voice of the Mountain," and "Small Towns and the River"—construct nature as a sacred archive that preserves cultural memory and identity through an indigenous eco-spiritual lens. Eco-spirituality is a concept that advocates for the protection of nature through a spiritual framework. It identifies nature as sacred and posits that humans have a moral responsibility to preserve it. Rooted in sociological and philosophical discourse, eco-spirituality challenges the anthropocentric worldview that positions the earth as a resource

for human exploitation. Instead, it proposes that humans are temporary residents of the earth, entrusted with the care of a shared, sacred habitat.

This perspective resonates deeply with traditional Indian worldviews, where the five elements—*prithvi* (earth), *jalam* (water), *agni* (fire), *vayu* (air), and *aakasham* (sky)—are revered as manifestations of the divine. Trees, mountains, and certain rocks are often considered abodes of deities, thereby affording them protection through ritual and taboo. As Sarvananda notes in his article, "Environmental Conservation in Hindu Life: Rituals, Fasting and More," the Vedic way of life is not a nostalgic relic but a living path forward: "From the breath we regulate to the food we offer, from the trees we tie threads around to the seasons we respect — the Vedic way of life is not a nostalgic past. It is a path forward . . . the five elements are not abstractions. They are realities to be honored — in action, architecture, and attitude." This underscores how rituals in Indian traditions often revolve around the protection and sustainable consumption of natural resources.

Indigenous eco-spirituality narrows this concept specifically to tribal and indigenous communities, whose relationship with nature extends beyond surface-level appreciation to encompass heritage, cultural identity, divinity, and the soul. For indigenous peoples, nature is not an external object but an extension of self, community, and cosmology. This worldview is deeply embedded in oral traditions, folklore, and ritual practices that encode ecological wisdom and ethical obligations toward the land. In literary discourse, eco-spirituality offers a critical framework for analyzing works by and about indigenous communities, enabling deeper understanding of tribal life, myth, culture, and tradition. In simpler terms, eco-spirituality can be understood as a sacred relationship between humans and their natural world, where the boundaries between the spiritual and the ecological dissolve.

In Dai's selected poems, nature functions as creator, saviour, guide, and companion. Landscapes such as mountains, rivers, wind, and prayer flags carry spiritual meaning, serving as symbols that connect human life with the sacred dimensions of the natural world. In Dai's poetry, divinity is not mediated through temples, chants, or ritual offerings; instead, the divine is immanent in the landscape itself—mountains and rivers become manifestations of the sacred. This aligns closely with animism, a belief system in which natural objects possess spiritual agency, souls, and connections to the afterlife.
"Small Towns and the River" exemplifies Dai's animist vision. The poem's central line—"The river has a soul"—encapsulates its core meaning: the river is not merely a physical entity but a sentient witness to the life of the town, instilled with divinity and memory. The lines emphasize the river's consciousness and its role in the history of the community:
The river has a soul.
In the summer it cuts through the land
The river has a soul.
It knows, stretching past the town,

from the first drop of rain to dry earth
and mist on the mountaintops,
the river knows
the immortality of water. (12-22)

Here, the landscape becomes sacred through the poet's use of language, which elevates the power of a river from a part of geography to something spiritual. The poem concludes with the line, "In small towns by the river / we all want to walk with the gods," (34,35) highlights the connection between the river and spirituality. Through the lines, "It knows, stretching past the town, / from the first drop of rain to dry earth / and mist on the mountaintops," (18-20), Dai underscores the role the river plays in memory, as it has witnessed the community's life. Through "the immortality of water" the writer suggests the idea that nature transcends human life.

This contrasts the modern idea, which views nature as something the human has power to exploit rather than a sacred entity which is to be preserved and honoured. The river's consciousness transcends human lifespans, making it an observer that holds the collective memories like joys, sorrows, and the transformation the town had. By associating memory to the river, Dai challenges the separation of nature and human, living and non-living and proposes an idea where all beings are interconnected through spirituality. The imageries emphasizes the role of river in maintaining human and other life forms. The health of the land is deeply connected with the health of the community, and where spiritual practices are connected with celebrating and honouring nature.

Similarly, "The Voice of the Mountain" celebrates the mountain as a sentient narrator. Mountains are often taken for granted—existing silently, unnoticed by most, understood by few. Dai reverses this dynamic by granting the mountain a voice, positioning herself as a mediator who transmits its message. Like the river in "Small Towns and the River," the mountain is a long-term witness to human life, capable of recounting the "chapters of the world":

I know the towns, the estuary mouth.
There, beyond the last bank
where the colour drains from heaven
I can outline the chapters of the world. (4–7)

The mountain's perspective offers a cosmic view of human history, suggesting that nature holds knowledge beyond human comprehension. Eco-spirituality is especially prominent in indigenous contexts, where the connection with nature attains heightened significance. For indigenous peoples, nature is intertwined with all three degrees of nature connectedness outlined by P. Wesley Schultz in his essay, "Inclusion with Nature: The Psychology of Human-Nature Relations." According to Schultz, "The cognitive component is the core of nature connectedness and refers to how integrated one feels with nature. The

affective component is an individual's sense of care for nature. The behavioral component is an individual's commitment to protect the natural environment."

Dai's poetry makes explicit that her people, as indigenous communities, exhibit deep connection with nature across all three components. This connection does not end with love for nature; it extends to active conservation and stewardship of their native places. In "The Voice of the Mountain," the mountain symbolizes a microcosm of nature, and the poet pays tribute to it through gestures of reverence: "I, also, leave my spear leaning by the tree and try to make a sign." (15–16). This act of laying down the spear signifies a shift from conflict to communion, from domination to reverence—a key tenet of eco-spiritual ethics.

Dai's poems are filled with symbols of longing alongside celebration of nature. In several works, she expresses yearning for a beautiful past, reflecting on the environmental and cultural changes she has witnessed as a member of the Adi tribe. Deforestation, mining, urban migration, and the erosion of traditional practices have profoundly impacted her psyche, and her poetry becomes a site for processing this trauma. In "Gone" and "Remembrance," she articulates this sense of loss and displacement.

A significant aspect of indigenous eco-spirituality focuses on the sacred dimensions of nature—religious and spiritual—while another emphasizes the moral imperative to protect the environment. Indigenous peoples often feel a heightened responsibility toward their natural surroundings, viewing conservation as both a spiritual duty and a cultural necessity. In "Gone," Dai laments:

What is felt
left unsaid,
is a sadness
Bereft of our symbols (21–24).

The poem begins by describing the deep connection between people and nature, then shifts to depict barren lands where flowers once bloomed and singing voices have fallen silent. She expresses frustration that outsiders cannot understand her people's aspirations, while the "burnt black hill" stands as a monument to their past:

How would anyone know what we have tried to do,
when there was me, and you,
and there was the burnt black hill
monumental with the faces of our people,
until the next moonrise showed us
something about change,
and the existence of dreams.
The steep hillside is a hard place.
There is nowhere to rest our feet

even when I want to kneel and pray,
moved to tears by a rainbow sky. (10–20)

The steep hillside becomes a metaphor for the struggles her community faces. Here, the landscape embodies both hardship and spiritual yearning. The inability to find rest—even in prayer—reflects the dislocation experienced by indigenous communities whose sacred spaces have been degraded or destroyed. "No Dream" further explores this theme of inner emptiness contrasted with nature's fullness. The poet begins by describing the dreams people hold, then juxtaposes this with her own sense of void. Nature is vibrant—the wind blows, mountains sit in silence, plants grow quietly, stars fall, leopards leave footprints—but she feels nothing:

Plant and foliage grow silently, at night a star falls down,
a leopard leaves its footprints.
The wind blows into my eyes (2–5).

Despite the abundance around her, she confesses, "I have no dreams" (16). The poem reaches its emotional height when she acknowledges that even though the sun shines within, the hills are wrapped in light, the river is happy, and love floats all around her, she remains disconnected. This dissonance between external natural beauty and internal emptiness underscores the psychological impact of ecological and cultural loss.

Indigenous life is fundamentally intertwined with natural elements. Wind, mountains, rivers, trees, sun, earth, and moon are not peripheral but central to daily existence. Even when individuals migrate to towns or cities for work, their roots remain anchored in the land of their origin. Dai, despite her education and administrative career, chose journalism and creative writing as her vocation, driven by her memory and connection to her roots. Tribal memory, in this sense, is inseparable from nature.

Mahima Thakur, in her book chapter "Sacred Landscapes, Trauma Memory, and Indigenous Environmental Knowledge in Contemporary Literature," articulates this relationship:

In indigenous knowledge systems, land is not a static backdrop to human activity; it is a dynamic reality that influences identity, community, and cosmological comprehension. Modern literature shows this change by showing sacred landscapes as active parts of healing, resistance, and ecological awareness. In this framework, landscape functions as an epistemic construct through which communities maintain memory, navigate trauma, and express different paradigms of sustainability. Sacred landscape serves not just as a narrative backdrop but also as a dynamic repository that preserves ecological knowledge and cultural continuity through generations.

In Dai's works, natural elements are not passive settings but active agents that weave together story, identity, and trauma. In "Gone," she connects longing, loneliness, and tribal struggles with the barren rock where flowers once bloomed:

At night we sleep with guns and gulls
tugging at land and oceans,
and ropes coiled to barren rock
where once flowers were to seed
pumping blood, and singing voices. (5–9)

The rocks bear the images of her people: "there was the burnt black hill / monumental with the faces of our people" (12–13). In "Remembrance," she reflects on the fragility of divine memory in nature:

Why did we think gods would survive
deathless in memory,
in trees and stones and the sleep of babies;
now, when we close our eyes
and cease to believe, god dies.
For as long as remembrance
men stared at fire and water (12–18).

These lines suggest that the sacredness of nature depends on human recognition and belief. When communities cease to see the divine in trees, stones, and rivers, the spiritual dimension of the landscape fades—a loss that parallels ecological degradation.Mamang Dai's poetry constructs nature as a sacred archive that preserves indigenous identity and cultural memory against the pressures of modernization and environmental degradation. Through her eco-spiritual imagination, she affirms the importance of the earth and the moral responsibility that all humans have where they have to live. Her work offers a model of cultural, where spirituality and ecology are inseparable. In an era of ecological issues, Dai's writing serves as both a reminder and a roadmap: the land is not for humans to own, but something that we should honour. Dai centers indigenous voices and spirituality, her poetry also challenges the idea of progress and offers a different vision that includes respect, morality and honour.

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