

**Orality as Resistance: Myth and Counter-History in Mamang Dai's
*Escaping the Land***

1.Sudhan. S. S

Ph. D Research Scholar, Department of English, Chikkaiah Government Arts and Science
College, Erode-4.

2.Dr. S. Sureshkumar

Assistant Professor of English, Chikkaiah Government Arts and Science College, Erode-4.

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Abstract:

Mamang Dai's *Escaping the Land* (2021) traces Arunachal Pradesh's transition from the colonial NEFA era to modern statehood. While official history relies on state-imposed written archives that marginalize indigenous perspectives, this paper argues that Dai uses "orality" as a subversive tool of resistance. By weaving ancestral myths like Kojum-Koja with historical events like the 1911 Abor War, Dai constructs a powerful counter-history. Through characters like Maying and Lutor, the novel demonstrates that oral memory is an active medium of survival, proving that while written history is weaponized by the powerful, oral storytelling reclaims the sovereign soul of the land.

Keywords: Orality, Counter-History, Indigenous Epistemology, Resistance.

Introduction:

Oral Tradition and the Limits of the Written Archive:

The history of frontier regions has often been shaped by two different ways of preserving the past: written records created by governments and oral traditions passed down by local communities. In Northeast India, especially in Arunachal Pradesh, this difference is central to understanding the region's history and identity. For centuries, indigenous communities such as the Adi preserved their history, customs, laws, and beliefs through oral storytelling, songs, myths, and collective memory. These traditions maintained their close relationship with the land without relying on written documents.

The arrival of British colonial rule, followed by the administration of independent India, introduced a system based on written records. Maps, census reports, administrative files, and the documents of the North-East Frontier Agency (NEFA) became the official sources of knowledge about the region. These records attempted to classify, govern, and

control both the land and its people. In contrast, Mamang Dai's *Escaping the Land* (2021) presents oral tradition as a powerful alternative to official history. By combining personal memories, government archives, and indigenous myths, Dai shows that oral memory is not simply a reminder of the past but a living form of resistance. This essay argues that in *Escaping the Land*, oral memory becomes a form of postcolonial resistance. Through a narrative inspired by indigenous storytelling, Dai challenges the authority of official records and shows that the true history of Arunachal Pradesh survives in the voices and memories of its people.

The conflict between written history and oral tradition forms the foundation of the novel. Governments understand frontier regions through maps, boundaries, laws, and official reports. This perspective appears through the old journals and NEFA notebooks that Maying studies during her research. These documents represent the state's effort to define and control the region by reducing its people and landscape to administrative categories.

The written files accumulated over decades of frontier administration represent a systematic attempt to box a living landscape into static categories. While the official diaries meticulously log physical coordinates, border posts, and tribal names for the purpose of taxation and state surveillance, they completely overlook the spiritual resonance and emotional life of the hills. (Dai 58)

This passage shows that official archives reduce sacred forests, rivers, and ancestral lands to geographical locations. Government records support a linear history that presents roads, dams, and modernization as signs of progress. Dai opposes this view by highlighting oral traditions, which are collective, flexible, and deeply connected to the landscape. Oral memories cannot be easily controlled or owned by the state. By placing these spoken histories at the center of the novel, Dai argues that the real history of Arunachal Pradesh survives in community memory rather than in government archives.

2. Myth, Oral Memory, and Indigenous History:

Dai introduces this conflict through the myth of Kojum-Koja. Before presenting political events or historical dates, she begins with an ancient oral story about a world that existed before a great flood. Kojum-Koja represents a time when humans, spirits, and nature lived together in harmony (Dai 12). By opening the novel with this myth, Dai places indigenous history before colonial rule or the formation of the modern nation-state.

The myth establishes that the Adi people's relationship with the land is older than any political boundary. When roads, government officials, and military forces later enter the region, they do not begin its history. Instead, they interrupt an already existing cultural and spiritual world. Kojum-Koja becomes a symbol of ecological balance and cultural continuity. Whenever the characters experience corruption, violence, or environmental

destruction, the memory of this ancient world allows them to question the values of modern development.

Dai also uses oral memory to reinterpret important historical events. Colonial and state records often described the tribes of Arunachal Pradesh as violent or primitive. The Abor War of 1911 and the Aching Mori incident of 1953 are usually presented in official histories as examples of tribal aggression that justified military intervention.

Through Lutor, however, Dai presents another perspective. Indigenous resistance is shown as an effort to protect ancestral lands and sacred traditions rather than an act of senseless violence. As a result, the novel reveals that official history often reflects the interests of those in power, while oral tradition preserves the experiences of marginalized communities. By recovering these forgotten memories, Dai challenges colonial history and restores dignity to indigenous voices.

3. Maying and Lipun: Between Written Knowledge and Oral Wisdom Maying's journey reflects the conflict between written knowledge and oral memory. Having studied in Delhi, she values documents, research methods, and written evidence. When she returns to Arunachal Pradesh to work on a documentary, she believes that cameras, notebooks, and archives can preserve history.

As her understanding deepens, however, she realizes that the most important aspects of her culture cannot be fully recorded. Stories, emotions, grief, and spiritual beliefs cannot be completely captured through documents or films. Reflecting on this limitation, she recognizes that attempts to preserve history often fail to capture "the silent, unwritten essence" of everyday life (Dai 142). This realization changes her understanding of knowledge. Instead of remaining an observer, she becomes part of the community's living memory.

The novel further develops this idea through Lipun. As one of the first educated tribal youths, he believes that learning the language of government will improve the lives of his people. His notebooks contain plans for development, national integration, and administrative reform, reflecting the state's vision of modernization (Dai 45). However, Lipun's idealism gradually disappears as he witnesses corruption, political manipulation, and violence. Dai summarizes this growing conflict through Lipun's experience: His notebooks carried the language of administration and progress, yet the villages around him continued to struggle with corruption, distrust, and the loss of traditional values. The promises of development seemed unable to heal the growing distance between the people and their land. (Dai 45)

Lipun finally realizes that bureaucracy often serves political interests rather than community welfare. His tragic experience demonstrates the danger of replacing indigenous

ethical values with impersonal administrative systems. Dai suggests that when communities abandon oral traditions and collective responsibility, they risk losing the moral foundations that once united them.

4. Lutor, the Rain Man, and Ecological Resistance

Unlike Lipun, who places his faith in government institutions, Lutor represents the strength of indigenous knowledge and oral tradition. As the descendant of a family of shamans, he preserves the spiritual relationship between the people and the land. His understanding of nature comes not from books or official records but from stories, rituals, and inherited wisdom. Through Lutor, Dai suggests that oral tradition is not only a way of remembering the past but also a way of understanding the natural world.

This connection is symbolized by the mysterious figure of the Rain Man. The Rain Man exists beyond ordinary human society and communicates through nature rather than through spoken language. His presence reflects an indigenous worldview in which rivers, forests, mountains, and weather are living forces rather than resources to be exploited. Lutor understands these natural signs because he has inherited the oral traditions of his ancestors. The novel suggests that the destruction of forests and rivers is not only an environmental problem but also a cultural and spiritual loss. When forests are cut down and rivers are dammed, communities lose the places where their stories, rituals, and memories are rooted. Dai repeatedly associates the land with memory and identity, showing that the survival of indigenous culture depends upon the survival of nature itself. Through Lutor's relationship with the Rain Man, the novel argues that protecting the environment is also an act of preserving cultural memory. Oral tradition therefore becomes a form of ecological resistance against the state's model of development.

5. Escaping the Land: Memory, Exile, and Identity

The title *Escaping the Land* suggests the possibility of leaving one's homeland behind. However, the novel gradually shows that such an escape is impossible for the indigenous characters. Many characters dream of leaving Arunachal Pradesh because of political violence, corruption, unemployment, and social change. Cities such as Delhi and Shillong appear to offer a better future. Yet physical distance does not free them from their memories or responsibilities.

As Dai explains, even after leaving home, people continue to carry "the sound of the flowing rivers" and "the ethical responsibilities of their ancestors" within themselves (Dai 112). The land remains part of their identity, making complete separation impossible. Migration therefore becomes a physical journey but not an emotional or spiritual escape. This idea is especially clear in the experiences of Maying and Lutor. Although both spend time away from Arunachal Pradesh, they continue to feel deeply connected to their homeland. Their memories, stories, and cultural traditions constantly draw them back. Dai suggests that identity is formed not by political boundaries but by shared memory and ancestral belonging. Oral tradition keeps this relationship alive across generations. The title

therefore has an ironic meaning. The characters may leave the land physically, but they cannot escape its memories, values, or emotional influence. Whenever they face uncertainty or loss, they return to the stories of their ancestors for comfort and guidance. Oral tradition becomes a source of strength that allows them to survive displacement and social change.

6. Narrative Style, Language, and the Power of Storytelling:

The resistance presented in *Escaping the Land* is expressed not only through its themes but also through its narrative style. Dai avoids a simple chronological structure. Instead, the novel moves freely between myth, memory, history, and the present. Ancient legends exist alongside colonial history and contemporary political events. This structure reflects the style of oral storytelling, where the past and present remain closely connected. Rather than following a straight timeline, Dai allows memories and stories to flow naturally into one another. This circular movement reflects the way indigenous communities remember history. The past is never completely finished because it continues to influence the present. Through this structure, Dai challenges the official idea of history as a single, linear record of progress.

Her language also contributes to this resistance. Although the novel is written in English, Dai shapes the language according to the rhythms and images of Adi oral tradition. She includes indigenous words, myths, and cultural references without offering detailed explanations for every term. This approach encourages readers to enter the cultural world of the novel instead of expecting it to conform to Western literary conventions. The poetic descriptions of rivers, forests, rain, mist, and mountains create an atmosphere that resembles oral storytelling rather than historical documentation. Nature is presented as a living presence that remembers the past along with the people. Dai's use of English therefore becomes an important postcolonial strategy. Instead of allowing English to erase indigenous culture, she transforms it into a language capable of preserving oral traditions and local history. The novel finally suggests that stories themselves are acts of resistance. Governments may control maps, archives, and official histories, but they cannot erase the memories that survive in songs, myths, and storytelling. Oral tradition protects experiences that official records often ignore. By telling these stories in English, Dai brings indigenous voices into world literature while preserving their cultural identity.

Conclusion:

Escaping the Land presents oral tradition as a powerful alternative to official history. Throughout the novel, Mamang Dai contrasts the written records of colonial and state authorities with the living memories of indigenous communities. While government archives reduce Arunachal Pradesh to maps, borders, and administrative reports, oral traditions preserve its spiritual, ecological, and cultural meanings.

Through characters such as Maying, Lipun, and Lutor, Dai demonstrates that written knowledge alone cannot explain the experiences of the Adi people. Maying learns that archives cannot capture the emotional truth of history. Lipun's faith in bureaucracy ends in

disappointment, revealing the limitations of modern political systems. Lutor, on the other hand, preserves the wisdom of oral tradition and maintains the sacred relationship between people and nature. The novel also argues that identity cannot be separated from the land. Even when characters leave Arunachal Pradesh, their memories and ancestral responsibilities continue to shape their lives. Oral storytelling keeps this bond alive by connecting individuals with their history, culture, and environment.

Ultimately, *Escaping the Land* shows that oral tradition is not a relic of the past but a living and dynamic source of resistance. It preserves histories that official archives overlook, protects cultural identity against political domination, and maintains the spiritual relationship between people and the land. In an age dominated by written records, surveillance, and official narratives, Dai reminds readers that the deepest history of a community survives in its stories, songs, and collective memory. Oral tradition therefore becomes both a form of cultural survival and a lasting expression of indigenous sovereignty.

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