

**From Homeland to Margins: Land, Identity, and Government Control in
Dai's *Escaping the Land***

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Article Received: 07/08/2026

Article Accepted: 08/09/2026

Published Online: 10/09/2026

DOI: 10.47311/IJOES.2026.8.09.17

Abstract:

Mamang Dai, a strong indigenous writer from Arunachal Pradesh, depicts, in her fiction, the captivating scenery, mythology, folklore, and myths of the Northeast region. The text examines the complex relationship between the land, Indigenous identity, and cultural displacement in Arunachal Pradesh. The current paper explores Mamang Dai's *Escaping the Land*, focusing on the indigenous identity of the Adi community of Arunachal Pradesh in Northeast India and locating the subversive tribal subjectivity in the context of the North East Frontier Agency (NEFA). The research paper also addresses the Adi ethnic group, which has undergone severe challenges of displacement and bi-regional identity, particularly in relation to the historical and socio-political factors that have contributed to their current situation. The research article focuses on the postcolonial theoretical perspective of subalternity, which has undergone a remarkable evolution from the battlefield to literary development. Dai's narrative reclaims marginalised voices and challenges dominant development. The subversive tribe emerges in the text as an active agent of resistance and redefines imposed identities, illustrating how their actions and narratives challenge the status quo and contribute to the broader discourse on subalternity.

Keywords: Adi community, Cultural Displacement, Arunachal Pradesh, Marginalisation, Political Power.

Introduction

Mamang Dai was born in a traditional Adi community in Bodong village, Upper Subansiri district, Arunachal Pradesh, in 1957. This region encompasses the greater Himalayas and extends eastwards, covering most of the northern part of Arunachal Pradesh.

Dai received the renowned Sahitya Akademi Award for her work, *The Legends of Pensam*, in 2017. Other literary contributions include *River Poems*, *Mountain Harvest: The Food of Arunachal Pradesh* (2004), and *Arunachal Pradesh: The Hidden Land* (2003). In addition to her few folklore books, including *Once Upon a Moontime* (2003) and *The Sky Queen*. El Balsamo Del YTiempo is an Assamese translation of The Balm of Time.

Dai's fiction, *Escaping the Land* (2021), weaves together history, myth, and contemporary politics to tell the narrative of the mystical notion of Kojum-Koja in Arunachal Pradesh. The text is divided into four books and narrates the historical journey of the transition from NEFA to Arunachal Pradesh. The text is compact with the variegated occurrence of the past: the Komsing case of 1911, the Aching Mori incident of 1953, the Chinese aggression of 1962, the liberation of Bangladesh in 1972, and Arunachal Pradesh's transition from a union territory to full-fledged statehood in 1987. History often ignores these events, but Dai's introspective mode gives space to ordinary people's actual experiences and challenges through the major characters in the text. The narrator, as well as the author's persona of the text, is Maying, who belongs to the Adi community but moves to Delhi for her education. She returns as a government official to set up a biodiversity office in the state. Her narrative depicts the contemporary history of Arunachal Pradesh and its transition from an unmapped political landscape. The narrative is situated in the context of an assembly election in Arunachal Pradesh, where Lutor is the contender for Chief Minister of the state's primary local party, the All-NEFA People's Party. Lipun, a junior government official, depicts the hardship of a government official serving in the Indian Frontier Administrative Service during NEFA days.

Mamang Dai's text, *Escaping the Land*, vividly portrays the theoretical lens of the indigenous communities of Northeast India and the Adi tribes of Arunachal Pradesh. It depicts the experiences of displacement, cultural erosion, and political marginalisation. The text shows the community's deep connection to the land, physical displacement, and loss of cultural rootedness. The indigenous people are positioned as silenced voices; the alien structure of governance and development marginalises their beliefs and traditions. This context reflects Antonio Gramsci's notion of subalternity, where ethnic groups negotiate their existence within a hegemonic order. Similarly, Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak's seminal question, "Can the Subaltern Speak?" highlights the epistemic silencing of marginalised voices. Spivak famously argues that "the subaltern cannot speak" (Spivak, 104), a strong notion suggesting that the voices of the oppressed are often erased. In the context of the Adi community, their experiences and identities fail to represent their lived realities. Thus, the text attempts to recover and articulate subaltern voices, challenging the structures while asserting the indigenous communities in Northeast India. Scholars and academicians have demonstrated the amalgamation of tribal society into mainstream society, and this is evident in the article "In general, the relation between tribes and non-tribes has been described as one of mutual coexistence rather than one of subjection and domination, at least until the

advent of British rule" (Xaxa, 3592). The present research endeavours to examine how tribal society differs from mainstream society, with special reference to the Adi tribes in Arunachal Pradesh.

Disintegration of the Adi tribe due to marginalisation and displacement:

The Adi tribes of Arunachal Pradesh are represented as isolated clans, and the gradual disintegration of the Adi community is depicted through the lenses of marginalisation, displacement, and socio-political transformation. The process of disintegration can be understood through the subaltern theory, which analyses the conditions of those ethnic groups that are often silenced and misrepresented; they are systematically alienated from their own land, culture, and identity, leading to the fragmentation of their indigenous traditional way of life. Spivak envisages the indigenous people, "At the regional and local levels [the dominant indigenous groups] . . . if belonging to social strata hierarchically inferior to those of the dominant all-Indian groups acted in the interests of the latter and not in conformity to interests corresponding truly to their own social being" (Spivak, 39), which shows the Adi community appears within systems imposed by colonial legacies and modern state policies.

The text begins with the chapter "The House of Calendars," where the narrator, Maying, visits an old house located on a hill in Itanagar. The house is filled with old calendars and memories and belongs to Lutor, an experienced politician who is humble and avoids speaking about his influence, even though he is widely respected by the people. Inside the house, the narrator experiences the passage of time. The old memories of the calendar symbolically represent the memory, history, and personal experience, while the narrator revisits an old journal titled NEFA NOTEBOOK, which evokes a profound connection to the past and the emotional connection to one's land and heritage. This chapter strongly presents land as not merely a physical space, but as a defining element of identity. Which Dai has described as "new roads and new towns growing faster than anyone could have imagined. Yet the land remained the same. Nothing could change the outline of the hills" (Dai, 6), emphasised the permanence of land in contrast to the changes in human life. While the political structures undergo transformation, the land, hills, forests, and rivers remain constant, unchanging, and eternal.

In the chapter "The original obsession," it begins with a symbolic dream of Lomey, a tribal man, who joins a group of warriors seeking revenge for the murder of their chief. They embark on a dangerous journey through forests to attack an enemy village. Though they aim to capture one man, the raid turns into brutal destruction. However, upon returning, they are stopped by government officials. "The new government would not permit tribal feuds, and the soldiers had come with orders to seize the captive and the men who had captured him. It was the order of the new Sarkari" (Dai, 11). After this news, the whole village fell silent. The new Indian state forbids tribal vengeance, marking a turning point in the traditional justice system. Now it's replaced by Sarkari niyon, rules, which would now

look after everything. It reflects the imposition of state authority over indigenous customs. It realises that their world is changing. Lomey says, “Our time is over, Lomey told his wife that night. Runners were carrying the news of their unimaginable triumph to distant villages. He himself had put his thumbprint on a number of sheets dotted with black, unknown lines..... We have put the seal on our fate. It is out of our hands” (Dai, 11), which shows the bureaucratic control replacing the tribal identity and the Sarkari rules displacing traditional knowledge and autonomy, creating a deep cultural and existential crisis. The narrator addresses the state intervention and the erosion of indigenous practices as follows:

All this was now a thing of the past. Since the Aching mori incident sarkari rules had banned slavery, blood feuds and head hunting among some tribes but still, Tanmut thought, there had been greater honour and valour in the old days-the frontier days when men had marched to distant villages to fight for land or celebrate a marriage alliance. What does a society do when an old practice is suddenly taken away by men who do not live with you but watch you from a distance and impose new laws with armed police? There is a space that needs to be filled, if only to carry on in some dignity towards a new way of life. (Dai, 98)

The sense of attachment to traditional practices is abruptly abolished by external authorities, breaking historical continuity. Practices like blood feuds and headhunting are deeply embedded in the community’s social structure, values, and identity. It’s not necessarily glorifying violence; it ties to ideas of courage and communal pride. This reflects Spivak’s idea that the subaltern “cannot speak,” not because they are silent, but because their voices are ignored by the dominant system of Sarkari rules. In the context of Dai’s text, the identity of the indigenous population of the hill region is affected by the government rules, leading to alienation from their own clan. Displacement caused by settlers, colonisation, or cultural modernity has profound effects on the cultural identity of the indigenous population. The narrator laments the widening gap between the people and the land; it’s affecting public space. The loss of cultural values is a major reason for the cultural displacement of the tribes.

The text also sheds light on the dark chapter of Arunachal Pradesh’s social history, exploring the prevalence of inter-tribal wars, inter-village conflicts, and inter-clan disputes, where captives lose their identities and memories, resigning themselves to a life devoted to an insidious system of slavery, a byproduct of these wars. This is vividly depicted in the passive victimhood of escape or agency.

Dai’s evocative text captures the generational impact of slavery:

This was how of hundreds of families were marched were kept apart but they were given food and shelter and ordered to clear fields and fell trees and chop wood for building and fencing arable land. They worked hard, and in time the younger, able-bodied men were sent to look after the mithuns, gather thatch for roofing, and bring

back fodder for the pigs. There were enormous wild yam that had to be dug out of steep hillsides covered with wet vegetation alive with the movement of leeches. The slave men returned torn and bleeding, and their women plucked out the bloated leeches in silence. The children scabbled for food, the families growled, snarled, recoiled from social contact and fell asleep like the dead, with no dreams. Years passed. The captive men died. Their wives succumbed to disease and despair and the new generation of men adopted the clan title of their owners. In time they settled into a familiar routine with their master's family. They had no memory of the places they had been taken from. They did not know fire and death and they had not heard the hard oaths and demented cries of their vanquished forefathers. (Dai, 96-97)

The profound representation of marginalised indigenous Communities is depicted through their material exploitation and cultural erasure under oppressive systems. Slavery portrays families subjected to relentless forced labour, performing exhausting tasks under harsh and exploitative conditions. The vivid portrayal of intense physical suffering highlights the deeper systematic destruction of identity and memory. Over the period, the captives lose all connection to their ancestors, and the younger indigenous tribes adopt the clan names of their masters, emphasising the dominant structure. This illustrates the loss of identity and the erasure of memory; they no longer recall their homeland, their ancestors, or the violence that led to their displacement. Memory plays a central role in cultural continuity & collective identity, and the disappearance of memory leads to a disconnection from their past and an inability to imagine an alternative. When the captives do not even conceive of escape, because they are consciously conditioned to accept subjugation as natural, their existence is reduced to mere Survival, depicted as life being merely food and breath, which strips human life of dignity, aspiration, and purpose. The Paradoxical claim that they are "happy" intensifies the state of emptiness, devoid of resistant thought. The text highlights that marginalised indigenous communities have been historically exploited as unpaid labour and socially isolated, often pushed to the margins of dominant society. Their cultural Practices, languages, and traditions are erased, pressured by assimilation into hegemonic structures. This aligns closely with the examination of marginalised groups who are systematically silenced and denied agency. The Condition of these captives exemplifies the "subaltern" position, where individuals exist outside the structures of power and lack the means to articulate their own voices. As argued, the Subaltern cannot speak; they are Voiceless, but their voices are erased and ignored by dominant discourses. Thus, the text reveals the deeper Violence of epistemic and Cultural domination, where marginalised indigenous people are stripped of identity, memory, and agency, ultimately rendering them invisible within history itself.

The Echoes of Kojum-Koja, Dai articulates mythic origins and indigenous territorial consciousness:

There is the land of Kojum-Koja.

It was a famous civilisation.

We came from there.

When we die,

We will be recognised by our ancestors.

A shower of leaves falling

from sacred trees will show us the way.

We own this land so that we may rest here.

NEFA is the land of the fittest survivors. (Dai, 46-47)

This reminds us of ancestral memory and spiritual continuity through the reference to “kojum-koja”, which suggests a remembered homeland that exists more in cultural memory than in present reality. The falling leaves from the sacred tree become a symbolic guide in the absence of stable roots. The claim to land ownership in NEFA is not about power but about survival and dignity in a place where life is hard, highlighting the struggle of displaced communities.

Political Power, Administrative Policy, and the Marginalisation of Indigenous Communities:

The journey from NEFA to Arunachal Pradesh is marked by a series of historical events, including cultural intrusion and interference in political and administrative policies, which led to significant social change in the region. Arunachal Pradesh remained unexplored due to its hilly geographical pattern, and there was little knowledge about the existence of other lands. The ethnic people's lack of desire to accept administrative subjection led to a bloody feud between the tribals and the outsiders, who were seen as threats intending to seize their land and impose control. The consequence of the feuds incited the gradual expansion of administrative control in the region. The significant turning point was the Komsing case in 1911, when the British political officer named Noel Williamson crossed the Inner Line on a survey mission into the Abor Hills and was attacked and killed by the Adi in Komsing village. This resulted in British troops marching into the Siang Valley during the punitive Abor expedition of 1911. “The Government of India also seized this opportunity to send survey missions into the hills to propose a suitable frontier line between India and Tibet. In 1914, the Hills area was renamed as the Frontier Tracts” (Dai, 14), which reflects the British colonial approach to governing the area, characterized by limited interference with this region and a focus on control, security, and frontier regulation.

Similarly, in the post-independence period, the incident of Aching Mori in 1953 refers to a group of Daphla tribals of the Tagin people who killed forty-seven members of an Indian government party, including personnel of the Assam Rifles, during an administrative tour in Aching Mori. This incident created an image of Arunachal Pradesh as a savage and primitive land. These events drew the attention of the central government, prompting changes in administrative strategies. The region was brought under the Ministry of External Affairs and administered through the Governor of Assam. In 1954, the region was officially renamed from the North East Frontier Tract to the North East Frontier Agency, marking the beginning of a new phase of governance. This led to growing tension between the local tribes

and the government, particularly the Tagin people, who viewed the expansion of Indian administration as a direct threat to their cultural and territorial sovereignty.

Dai sheds light on the dedication and patriotic devotion of those trailblazing officials for their land and people, building the foundation for AP through the character of Lipun, a junior government official who serves as a poignant example of the hardships faced by government officials in the Indian Frontier Administrative Services during the NEFA days. Lipun was posted in a remote outpost, involving months of foot marches through dense jungles, all while facing the constant threat of wild animals and agitated tribals. Despite these adversities, Lipun's commitment to the land and its people becomes a testament to the enduring spirit.

Dai emphatically presents the perception of tribes that led to the bloody incident of Aching Mori through the character Lipin:

Some of them had heard of him. 'Jai Hind!' they him. The chief of the village was a grand old man who called his people around him to talk to Lipun. They laid their sticks on the ground and said: 'Look! This was the dark cloud! These soldiers were the dark cloud! They were coming to make us into slaves!'

'No!' Lipun argued. 'Look at you. What is wrong with that woman there? Why is your son ill all the time? Why are your eyes going blind? It is not ghosts. It is not spirits. It is disease! These things happen everywhere. People are cured by doctors who give you medicines. If you let the government, come here your people will be healthier and happier. I promise you no one will steal your land. No one will turn you into slaves. If the Chinese come again the government will protect you. If they come again, where will you go? What will you do? Where are your fields? Where is your rice and salt? How long will you live like this? (Dai, 44-45)

Moreover, Dai text also incorporates other key historical events, such as the India-China war of 1962, and the liberation of Bangladesh in 1971, both of which influence administrative restructuring in the region. Through these historical references, *Escaping the land* serves as a chronicle of the region's tumultuous history. Dai skillfully navigates through the socio-political landscapes, addressing significant legislative milestones such as the enactment of the Bill for the Control of Organised Crime Act (APOCO) and the far-reaching consequences of these events on indigenous people.

Lutor is a prominent political character who bid for the office of Chief Minister, serving as a microcosm of the larger political landscape. The character is caught in a dichotomy of great humiliation and a pitying love for his homeland. Lutor and his companions echo throughout the reassuring refrain, "We are safe in the hills", which shows the love and loyalty of one's land and people. Throughout history, many forces have tried to gain control over the region for political advantage. In one Political rally, Lutor says:

Don't be fooled. A "security issue" is a slipper fish. The terms of reference are always changing. Yes, are a border state but our interests for the country and the security of the state is the same. So why is a security issue" something that we cannot talk about? Why can we not discuss what is important to us? What sort of state are we? Are we a peaceful state, or not? (Dai 80)

The discontent among the Adi is clearly reflected in these lines. Their marginalised status has limited their ability to bring attention to and effectively represent their concerns within national politics. This context clearly reflects the Adi community positioned at the margins, struggling to have their voices heard in national politics.

The text examined the transition from homeland to margins, which is one of the most significant themes in the text. The lifeworld of Adi communities is gradually displaced physically, culturally, and psychologically. In the form of development, the government introduce new policies, security, and new systems of regulation that disrupt the traditional life of the Adi community. The new laws and the administrative boundaries are transforming indigenous spaces into controlled zones of state authority. In this process, the people's ancestral land is repositioned, making them outsiders within their own territory. Now, the homeland, which has been converted into a marginal space of indigenous communities, who are struggling to survive under external control. Generations of indigenous people are beginning to lose their ancestral connection. This Creates a shift from a community-centred to a state-imposed framework, resulting in a rupture in their identity, where the Past becomes inaccessible, and the future is uncertain. This condition reflects that marginalised communities are systematically pushed to the edges of society. The paper also highlights that political power and administrative policy play a prominent role in the transformation. Administrative measures introduced in the States, like the former NEFA (North-East Frontier Agency), bring about new forms of authority that override the indigenous system of governance. These policies impose a top-down model of governance that prioritises state interest over local needs. This has led to a form of structural Violence, where policies were not intended to protect the indigenous community; instead, they actually contribute to dispossession and marginalisation.

Bioregional Consciousness and Indigenous Identity:

Arunachal Pradesh is a hotspot for large-scale forest resources. It depicts the lived experiences of the Adi community, whose sense of self is deeply rooted in the land, rivers, and forests. Bioregional consciousness foregrounds the intimate relationship between human communities and their ecological habitats. The narrator, Maying, has a main purpose in returning to her native land was to set up a biodiversity office to check the large-scale destruction of forests in Arunachal Pradesh. Her experiences bring a deep emotional and critical detachment from the land, rooted in its rapidly deteriorating ecological conditions and the surrounding corruption.

Dai shows that economic greed and environmental destruction have changed the indigenous values:

For a decade the timber boom had kept everyone happy until the dream was shattered when the Supreme Court suddenly clamped a Ban Order on timber operations in the state. A shudder of rage hit the timber barons. People gasped in shock. The ban was a response to an investigation report prepared by an environmental organisation, complete with satellite photos of vast clearings in the middle of Forest Reserves and Protected Areas attached as evidence. When the whole world was concerned about global warming, environment and climate change, the state of Arunachal Pradesh was burning and destroying thousands of hectares of virgin forest. In frenzied reaction, the state's political parties, youth organisations, merchants and local industrialists, everyone, rushed to New Delhi to shout, plead, curse, threaten and chant slogans in the capital against the ban. 'Pay us for keeping our forests, they cried. (Dai, 183)

The direct intervention on the part of the state, using laws to stop the smuggling of timber, is necessary. The Supreme Court imposes a ban on timber operations in the state in response to environmental degradation. However, the ban received collective outrage from political groups, merchants, and even local communities deeply entrenched in a profit-driven mindset. According to the Adi belief system, they feared the spirits of their ancestors in the big trees, which posed a threat to their fundamental faith of Animism. The Adi do not protest against the timber mafia. The rising voice against the exploitation of forest resources might have severe consequences for the tribes.

Kellan worked at the Forest Department, his ironic approval of the timber ban was evident when he said, "feeling relieved and secretly pleased about the Ban Order. Give them money to keep their forests. The people had tasted money and nothing else would appease them now. Stuff their mouths with bundles of money!" (Dai, 183). This emphasises the internal conflict within the community between economic desires and ecological responsibility, suggesting that the lure of money has altered indigenous values and contributes to identity loss.

The text constructs a narrative that revives indigenous Adi epistemologies through myths, oral traditions, and collective memory, thereby enabling a process of reinhabitation. It is central to bioregional thought, which involves learning to live sustainably in a colonised environment by recovering indigenous practices and values. Dai retrieves Adi's myths, such as the origin story of kojum- koja and the reverence for the earth mother kine Nagano. "Before everything else, there was the land of Kojum-Koja, a sacred place beyond the moon and stars. This was the first civilisation from where man began his journey through the different heavens to descend into the world carrying stories of happiness and hope" (Dai,90). Dai tells the story of Mother Earth and Nyanyi Mete, the celestial aunt of humans. These stories are not relics of the past but active cultural forces that guide present behaviour. Adi believes kiine Naame to be the Source of all kinds of seeds and grains on the earth. Rituals

like the Aran festival represent the myth is hooted in everyday Adi life, reinforcing ecological ethics such as gratitude and respect for the land.

Ultimately, the text gestures towards bioregional consciousness, a subtle yet powerful counterpoint to state control. This Consciousness is reflected in the ways indigenous communities understand and interact with their surroundings. Even as external pressures disrupt their relationship with nature, they offer a form of resistance to homogenising state policies. The text proposes that, despite displacement and marginalisation, indigenous knowledge and environmental ethics continue to survive, albeit in altered forms.

Conclusion

The research paper offers a profound layer of exploration of Indigenous land, identity, disrupted, and how they are disrupted and reconfigured under the pressures of administrative intervention and historical change. The text reveals the complex relationship between land, memory, and identity, depicting how indigenous communities are inseparable from the ecological and cultural rhythms of their homeland. The article is also effectively understood through the lens of Subaltern studies, which provides a critical framework for analysing the experiences of marginalised groups who exist outside the dominant power structure. The paper also examined marginalisation. By using Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak's work, it famously argued, that the subaltern cannot "Speak" within the structures that marginalise them, as their voices are often mediated by dominant discourses. The text is evident in the gap between indigenous experience and administrative narration. However, the paper concludes with a discussion of indigenous resistance against State control and subjugation. In this way, it demonstrates the Political power and administrative policies that reshape not only landscapes but also disrupt the delicate balance between people and place. Ultimately, this study amplifies marginalised voices, challenging dominant narratives, and advocates for a more inclusive understanding of history and identity.

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