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“We Exist in Water”: A Select Study of Mamang Dai’s River Poems

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Abstract: Rivers exist all over the world and have been an integral part of cultural identity in ways that engage with the social system. It has also been a subject of enquiry and inspiration across the ages, engaging men of science, men of faith, and men of poetry alike. In indigenous literature, water imagery appears in the trope of rain or rivers acting as an entity of their own. However, the affinity between the two runs deeper than simply co-existing in a shared space, and what is often overlooked is understanding matters of interaction and, consequently, the construction of relationships.

Therefore, this paper will study the portrayal of rivers in literature, particularly in Mamang Dai’s collection of poems titled *River Poems* (2013), to understand the role of rivers and their significance in the cultural tradition of the people of Arunachal Pradesh. When the world is facing catastrophic events such as the global climate crisis, this paper will allow a better comprehension of how tribal cultures will be affected as well. It will also attempt to identify how rivers can contribute toward our understanding of the abiotic elements and locate their importance in the human-nature continuum. Additionally, Dai’s poetry collection will also add to the repertoire of where knowledge about rivers is produced.

Keywords: Rivers, Culture, Identity, Tribal worldview.

Introduction

Human beings’ relationship with the environment is one that beckons reciprocity. This relationship unfolds in various ways, and one such bond between human lives and nature is seen in tribal societies. The literary works from North East India are often stereotyped as echoing a violent past. Gory images with blood-filled stories of wars and violence often dominate the understanding of most people, and thereby, the same understanding is extended when it comes to literary works from the region. However, beneath the one-sided perception lies a profound element of “an intense sense of awareness of the cultural loss and recovery” (*The Oxford Anthology* xi).



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Over the years, the literary scene in North East India has undergone a tremendous change, which is referred to by Temsula Ao as a “new maturity” (“Writing Orality” 109). Although this new found maturity is a different temperament that features in the works of North East writings, it is not to be mistaken with a total separation of political and colonial undertones. Despite the presence of violence and guns, these writers incorporate a part of themselves in their works, the essence of which is represented by the presence of their myths and legends. Mamang Dai calls this a unique feature of the region (“On Creation Myths” 5). The flowering of this new body of writing was further magnified by the new custom of using the English language as the writing medium, which added to the region’s uniqueness (Pou 8).

Among the states in North East India is Arunachal Pradesh. The region which shares its borders with Bhutan, China and Myanmar, is rich in natural resources as it is rich in scenic beauty. Arunachal Pradesh is largely known by its river ecosystem, and the importance and significance of these rivers in the lives of the people of Arunachal Pradesh is evident through many of the literary works from the land. One such work is the *River Poems* (2013), a collection of poetry by the renowned Arunachali writer Mamang Dai.

Mamang Dai is a poet and novelist who belongs to the Adi tribe of Arunachal Pradesh. Her writings are well-known both locally and globally, and they have appeared in numerous anthologies and publications. She was honored with the Verrier Elwin Award in 2003 for her work *Arunachal Pradesh: The Hidden Land* (2000). Dai’s works invoke the words of Jeetumoni Basumaraty, who describes the character of North East Indian writers writing in English: “they write from the spaces of the folk and the community . . .” (“Community Fiction” 123)

Dai’s *River Poems* (2013) is a collection of poetry that is centred on the landscape of the mountainous state. The poems take into account both biotic and abiotic elements of the land that intertwine with the lives of the people. Every detail is captured in a way that has left an imprint in the memory of the people, with the poet bringing instances of nostalgia, lest their history be forgotten by her people. She also incorporates elements that form their myths, creating an image that is essential to their lives. The poems do not isolate the subject of rivers in the discussion, but the idea of the river is to be understood as a prominent feature of the place that plays an equally

prominent role in the cultural identity of the people. They help the readers understand how rivers find their way into the narrative about the local meaning and identity. The collection is also aptly titled, considering the fact that Arunachal Pradesh is known for its many rivers.

Rivers and lives: Indigenous way of understanding

“[Rivers] connect and divide people, they are never still, and they traverse many ecosystems and cultures” (*Open Rivers* 10). One of the reasons Dai believes the fascination with the land within the minds of explorers is the “course of the river Tsangpo of Tibet” (*Arunachal Pradesh* 56). The river had a magnetic appeal to the foreign minds, which also opened them to a fascination with the people and their culture. Therefore, rivers can be seen as a key element to understanding the land and its people. Such an understanding echoes Masaru Emoto’s statement: “Understanding the fact that we are essentially water is the key to uncovering the mysteries of the universe” (21). Similarly, Wendy F. K’ah Skáahluwáa Todd et al. reiterate “we exist in water throughout our lives” (8).

For indigenous people and their communities, rivers serve as more than a source of water. It is a wellspring of material source as much as it is physical. The connection it builds among generations and even among cultures is remarkable in a way that transcends time and boundaries. From providing a mode of transport to providing water and food, the way indigenous people view it is from a place of reverence, which can be identified with the statement “rivers reflect history” (*Rivers: A Very Short Introduction* 47), and a similar reading can be made of Mamang Dai’s poems from her collection *River Poems* (2013).

Memory in the water

Masaru Emoto claims that “water reflects the various events that unfold throughout a person’s life” (1). Such a message is reflected in Dai’s poems as well. Dai discusses the Siang River in her poem, “The Missing Link”. The river that links the Brahmaputra River in Assam and the Tsangpo River in Tibet was once thought to be the “missing link.” By making the river Siang the subject of the poem, Dai connects it with the identity of her people. The “linking” function of the river is also interpretative of its cultural significance. It mirrors Dai’s words in *Arunachal Pradesh: The Hidden Land* (2000), where she mentions how the different tribes of Arunachal Pradesh identify their migration stories with “caves, river crossings and unknown mountain passes” (13). The river, therefore, serves not

only as a link between the two other great rivers but also functions as a link to their history, identity and their entire existence. Like a living entity, Dai in “The Missing Link” mentions:

The river was the green and white vein of our lives
linking new terrain (Dai, lines 15-16)

Additionally, she heralds a message to the rest of the people, she asks them to:

Remember the river’s voice:
Where else could we be born
where else could we belong
if not of memory (Dai, lines 24-27)

The poet encourages her people to search the recesses of their memory of the river to find themselves. The river is more than simply a source of waterway; it also acts as a bedrock of knowledge to be passed on to future generations which can be identified with the statement: “Spending time on rivers and billabongs is central to intergenerational knowledge and cultural transfer, and family time. There are thousands of years of memories in these water places” (qtd. in “Embedding Aboriginal Knowledge”).

Dai relives her memory of the land by going back and forth to the river. The poems “Ties”, “The Pale Road”, and “Rivers” document a connection between the poet and the land by consistently bringing up the image of the river. The river imagery can be interpreted as an indispensable part of understanding the culture and its people. It reflects the core of the documentary *Voice of Siang* (2018) by Joor Baruah, where the filmmaker’s attempt to give the river a voice of its own also results in capturing the tale of the land and the lives of the people in it and their bond with the river. The poem “Ties” reads:

Among strangers and friends
suddenly I would recall
rivers, and summer rain,
the vivid years. (Dai, lines 8-11)

The memory of the river has been etched deep into the poet’s faculty in ways that whenever she recollects it, scenes of the past unfold like the flowing water of the river. In “The Pale Road”, she says:

Every step of the road
is marked with signs.

I see the river again.
The wind strains
every branch and tree
and so many thoughts
cross my mind, (Dai, lines 1-7)

It only takes her recollection of the river memory to bring forth every other thought – the quietness of home, the streets, the headlights of a car, and the outskirts of a town. The kind of connection it leads to is interesting in the way the poet captures even the slightest of details.

Rivers: Where dreams and realities meet

Arunachal Pradesh, being a tribal society, is governed by the many myths and legends of its place and also of each of the tribes. These stories have been passed on through their rich oral tradition, the influence of which still lingers in their written literature. In exchange, a relationship that “links the individual to a group” is established through the documenting of their culture and identity (“On Creation Myths” 4). These tales which are told through their myths and legends are considered more than simply stories to be retold, but are part of their identity.

In the poem “Rivers”, Dai incorporates dream-like elements, creating a flow like that of a river. The opening stanza of the poem reads:

The river of dreams
penance and pilgrimage,
linking life’s designs
in truth and legend (Dai, lines 1-4)

The ebb and flow pattern of the river is embodied in the poem, and Dai’s way of integrating the past and the present is carefully executed, where the river acts as the medium of bringing the two together. Although she does not precisely mention which river is the subject here, one of the interpretations can be understood as the Brahmaputra River in Assam, which is known as the Siang River in Arunachal Pradesh. Talking of “penance” and “pilgrimage” can be an indication of the sacredness of the Brahmaputra River. Following these lines, the movement of the poem takes on a similar movement to that of a river that has an equally significant relevance among the people of Arunachal Pradesh. Its interpretation can be understood as an idea of the river as a source of dreams, both figuratively and metaphorically. The juxtaposition of “truth” and “legend” provides a glimpse into the myth-filled

culture of the people. These myths and legends still dominate their lives and are passed on to the younger generation. According to Dai, “they are not even perceived as stories anymore but as beliefs determining a way of life” (“On Creation Myths” 4). The following lines from “Rivers” attests to it:

changing
like the moon
eternal
as the sun (Dai, lines 5-8)

The scene highlights a nuanced understanding of how generations would come and go, like the different phases of the moon. However, like the never-changing sun, the truth about the land and its people remains the same. At the same time, it also points to the river that seems to be changing over the years due to human activities, but its effect still resonates through their oral history and different forms of literature.

The myriad cultures of the North East India possess a rich and colourful storytelling tradition (*The Oxford Anthology* xv) and Dai’s “River Poems” is a very interesting take on the oral tradition of her people. Despite the lack of a written script, what the poet records about the practice is well captured in the poem:

Without speech
we practiced a craft,
leaving imprints on sky walls (Dai, lines 1-3)

The title “River Poems” is suggestive of works of poetry that have been produced from the land, and an examination of how the Siang River or the many rivers of the land have been influential in charting a tradition of storytelling can be studied. Therefore, it becomes important to identify with Patricia Mukhim’s statement: “To people of the North-east, their world is central to themselves” (“Where is this North-east?” 179). The world of these tribes is a world that has been created without a written script but by charting and mapping the physical world. The sky, the mountains, the trees and the rivers play a central role in understanding the tribal worldview, without which it would be incomplete.

Rivers: Herald a warning

One of the transitions that took place in the North East’s literary environment is the examination of biotic and abiotic elements. In this aspect, such works discuss and deal with ecological and environmental catastrophes. As Esther Syiem puts it, “there are voices in the wilderness crying for sensitivity and compassion, and navigating the

path beyond mere protest to a discovery of the humane and profound” (35), one such voice of concern is heralded by Dai in the poem “Remembrance”.

Why did we think survival was simple,
that river and field would stand forever
invulnerable, even to the dreams of strangers (Dai, lines 6-8)

The tone incorporated in these lines is suggestive of a rather grim picture that has now enveloped the entire idyllic scene. It is also suggestive of colonial expansion and occupation that took place in the land. The soldiers’ “footfall” and the weapons that are “multiplying in the forest” indicate the impending changes that would soon cloud their land. The same poem captures the poet’s laments and provides a picture of their dying traditions with the onslaught of colonial occupation.

Why did we think ritual 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. (Dai, lines 17-21)

The mention of trees and stones is indicative of the close affinity that was once shared among the people and the land, which is also a feature of the tribal worldview. However, with changes being brought in by exposure to the colonial mindset and ideas from the West, the poem is a cry for reviving traditions of the past. At such a crucial juncture, the poet beckons a message of remembrance, taking the readers to a nostalgic time when:

men stared at fire and water (Dai, line 23)

Conclusion

In the words of the writer herself: “Arunachal Pradesh is, still today, a last great frontier of indigenous culture.” Taking up the subject of rivers as a study in this paper provides an insight into how rivers are understood, used, and valued, and at the same time allows the readers to connect with the voices from the frontier that would hitherto remain unheard. Mamang Dai’s collection of poems *River Poems* (2013), stands as a testament against the test of time, where she uses various elements of the past, such as the myths and legends of the tribal tradition of Arunachal Pradesh, to show its relevance in an age where rich cultural traditions are falling prey to the fast-changing global trends. Among the many cultural motifs, the incorporation of the idea of a river, specifically the Siang River, has

allowed for the establishment of a strong connection with the historical roots of the land of Arunachal Pradesh and its people. Given their numerous migration tales that follow the river's path and the fact that it has been essential to the hill people's ability to sustain their way of life, the river becomes an essential component of their lives and culture as a whole. The poems are a documentation of what was and what might happen if the people neglect to understand how the tribal worldview possesses an understanding of its close connection with its land and its surroundings.

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