

## **Symbolism of the Mountains: A Study of Selected Poems of Mamang Dai**

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### **Abstract**

Mamang Dai, celebrated writer from Arunachal Pradesh often glorifies nature in its primordial form. She celebrates both the mystic as well as the commonplace that nature radiates; exploring myths behind the 'forces of nature', and thus leading the reader to ecological forests and magic drum beats. Mountains form a leitmotif of several of her poems, and they lead us to ancient myths and rich tribal folklore. Mountains are thus not a mere landform, but an intrinsic part of the collective psyche of the people of Arunachal Pradesh. The paper aims to examine the significance and the symbolism of the mountain in the following poems of Mamang Dai: "An Obscure Place", "The Voice of the Mountain" and "Small Towns and the River". In each of the poems the poet portrays the important place that mountains have in tribal pantheons. The antiquity of the mountains, their sacredness and mystique in Mamang Dais' poems adequately bring out their symbolism and significance. The poet weaves around them antique tales and myths, which are part of an ancient oral tradition and which also have a close connection to modern day concerns about environmental protection.

**Key Words:** Myth, Folklore, Indigenous, Primordial, Dreamtime.

**M**ountains play an important role in the quest for understanding interactions between nature and society. To study this mountain symbolism without a careful consideration of how mountain literature replicates and shapes geographical imaginations would only tell part of the story (Blake 527).

In Mamang Dais' poems the mystique and grandeur of mountains along with myth and folk lore surrounding them weave an ethereal story around these land masses. Mamang Dai is a celebrated writer of Arunachal Pradesh whose works are steeped in tribal folklore. A former bureaucrat, Mamang Dai has the prestige of being awarded the Padamshree for her contribution to literature. She has written many poems and two novels, one

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of which deals with myths of her land. She writes of elements of nature like clouds, rivers and mountains and in her works can be felt that primordial search for a 'homeland' in the spiritual sense of the term. Coming from Arunachal Pradesh, she has seen the scourge of insurgency from close quarters and has been sorrowed over this long battle. She dreams of a peaceful vine and bamboo paradise where the cloud, the bat and the rain are in absolute harmony.

In fact recently, Arunachal Pradesh was reeling under an economic blockade and Mamang Dai's hometown was badly affected by such blockades (Naga). The people of Arunachal Pradesh were put to great inconvenience with prices of domestic commodities sky rocketing. Blockades such as these are common and accepted as the destiny of the people in this part of the world. While being awarded the Padmashree, YD Thongchi, President Arunachal Pradesh Literary Society said that Mamang Dai 'is firmly rooted with the soil of her birth place'. He also remarked that her heart was always in consonance with the rivers, mountains, trees, jungles, rituals, legends, mythology, dances, villages, prayer flags of her 'dear abode, Arunachal Pradesh' (Padmashree).

The hills also form a common theme of several writers of the North-Eastern states. Temsula Ao, Mona Zote, Robin Ngangom and YD Thongchi find it natural to write about mountains with their glory and pristine sublimity. The mountain is not merely another memory of childhood and youth but forms part of a continuing relationship with the environment. The insularity of the northeastern states are also related to the terrain in which hills and mountains constitute a formidable barrier. The 'mainland versus hinterland' debate follows also from the 'so called distance' in terms of miles and milestones. The North East has been unique in the way it has administered itself over the years. Sujata Miri says that none of the communities in the North East conceived of a law of peace which would apply to any other community but themselves. If there was a war it was always fought within the parameters of certain rules. In such a conflict, the main consideration was the preservation of one's own territory rather than "extension of it". Thus traditionally accepted actions were in consonance with the goal of peaceful co-existence (Miri).

The name Arunachal Pradesh itself represents the Sanskrit meaning of 'The Land of the Dawn Lit Mountains' as this state receives the first rays of the sun in the country. Hence, little surprise that the mountains form the

story lines of many a narrative here. Arunachal is a land of great beauty with soft snow covered peaks, which on melting tumble into rowdy streams and rivers. In fact, the state has the honour of being one of the greenest parts of the country (Dai, Oral Narratives, 1). In an article on Arunachal Pradesh, Dai says that Arunachal is still one of the 'last frontiers of the world' where indigenous faith and practices still survive in an almost original form as handed down by ancestors. It is, however, equally true that, because of the remoteness and historical isolation of this 'forgotten land', there is little dissemination of information about the goings on in the state (Dai, Arunachal Pradesh). There are several tribes in Arunachal Pradesh and they follow an indigenous lifestyle. Their beliefs in nature are very strong and by that corollary they become champions of the environment. Sacred forests, birds and beasts form part of their collective consciousness. The highest mountain peak in the Aka (one of the tribes of AP) inhabited area called Wojophu is considered a sacred mountain and removal of any resources from there and even hunting is strictly prohibited. Akas believe that breaking of such taboos will lead to bleeding from nose and mouth finally leading to death. So, even today this mountain is covered with dense forest cover (Chaudhari, 5).

In *An Obscure Place* (Dai, Muse India) the mountains provide a kaleidoscopic view of the area. The prayers of the people pass on the slopes of the mountains. There are cloud formations which appear to be chasing ants. In the patterns of the clouds and the imagination of the writer, there is a tussle between the ants and the wild cat. The mountains know all the deep secrets; they know that the 'hornbill' - a magnificent bird has been buried in her 'maternal sleep'. The mountains are omniscient and they know the past, the present and the future. The words of strangers lead the people into a deep mist, over grassy slopes where ancestors' bones lie buried amidst great beauty. Dai says that the people of the area climbed every slope and they spent their nights by the river. The hope was to find a new home but victory is a long drawn thought. The mountain thus not only embodies the collective consciousness of hope of a people but also embodies the fears and lost expectations in an increasingly complicated and changing society.

Again in *The Voice of the Mountain* (Dai, India International Centre) Dai says that the mountain can identify with the desert and the rain. It is also the bird that sits in the west. The past is recreated by the mountains. The mountain tells us of 'life with particles of life that clutch and cling for thousands of years'. Mountains represent life forms and contribute to a churning of life of 'thousands of years'. The mountains know the rocks that shine in the

sun. The mountains know the clouds intimately and have a clear inkling of the impending rain. The relationship between the mountain and the cloud is intrinsic. The clouds by shedding their moisture on the mountains share a symbiotic relationship with this landform. The mountain calls the cloud 'this uncertain pulse that sits over its heart'. The cloud may fall anytime but only with the connivance of the mountain.

The geographical concepts of mountains acting as rain shadow and rain shedding natural structures are interlinked with the philosophy of the hill tribes. The tribes through their traditional knowledge and experience understand the linkages between mountains and rains. Their belief systems are intrinsically entwined with nature and its preservation and their lifestyles replicates the traditional practices.

Mamang Dai in the article "The Nature of Faith and Worship among the Adis" remarks that the great forest, the mountains and the environment shaped the consciousness of the Adi people and made them decorate the Pator Gate (A gate made of leaves and branches and considered holy) with arrows tipped with ginger and the sacred branches of the 'Taan' tree to consecrate it against evil forces (Dai, The Nature of Faith among Adis).

A report on "Sustainable Mountain Development" by the UN Secretary-General in the year 2009, states that even after seven years from the International Year of Mountains, many of the challenges remain. In an increasingly globalized world, mountain communities and their environments continue to remain vulnerable to 'growing demands for water, natural resources, tourism, out-migration, incidences of conflict and the pressures of industry, mining and agriculture (United Nations 4). Thus tribal communities feel the heat as they derive their sustenance from the mountains which are their homes. Mamang Dai feels this closing in on the indigenous tribes, who experience a sense of loss and displacement.

The mountain is like an oracle, telling stories of change and yet bearing the nature of permanence. In the end of the poem *The Voice of the Mountain*, the mountain knows that the universe gives nothing but 'an appearance of being permanent'. Peace is a falsity, the mountain remarks. The last line of the poem is significant as it is a resonance of the conditions of the world. Regimes may change and the dream of a true homeland maybe fulfilled, but peace ever eludes. The existence of truth is an existential reality, but behind it is the turmoil and dissatisfaction of a nation. Several movements for peace over the ages have achieved peace on the ashes of violence and bloody

wars. History is a mere spectator to these violent revolutions and the innocence of peace has often been cloaked in the guilt of blood.

Bipin Patsani commenting on the style of Dai's writing says that Mamang is gracefully lyrical in both *River Poems* (Writers Workshop) and *The Legends of Pensam* (Penguin). She writes with "rare passion and flow, fresh and full like the Siang river that meanders through her valley". He also tells us that her poems are full of the essence of tribal myths, mountains and an intense emotional involvement with her land (Patsani).

In her poem *The Balm of Time* she, like the true animist that she is, asserts, "Yes I believe in gods, in the forest faith/ of good and evil/ spirits of the river/ and the dream world/ of the dawn." *River Poems* contains poetry which one can only describe as "old world, neo romantic in essence"(Daruwalla). "a race of fireflies bargaining with the night." Her poems are, engaging with landscape and nature, through a half-animist, half-pantheistic outlook. "I know where memory hides/ in the long body of the mountain." "The river has a soul," she says, "it knows the immortality of water." Folk lore of aborigines are also closely related to nature. For the aborigines the world was not created ex nihilo. Rather, the 'pre-existing ancestral spirits transformed a pre-existing world of things and conditions' into structures that are immutable today. This primordial period, called the 'Dreamtime', was the beginning of life itself and in it the ways of life, the law, the moral code were set down to be followed eternally (Dean 3). In Aboriginal mythology, Dreamtime is the sacred creation moment. Aboriginal people often interpret dreams as being the memory of things that happened during this Creation Period. Dreams are also important because they can be a time when we go back into that ancestral time. This linking of dreams to the Creation Period has led people to adopt the general term "The Dreamtime" in order to describe the time of creation in their religion. The term "Dreamtime" in Aboriginal mythology is not really about a person having a dream, but rather, a reference to this Creation Period (Layton).

In the poem *An Obscure Place* (Dai ,Muse India), Mamang Dai says that the history of the people of Arunachal Pradesh is an oral one and it is full of stories and myths. There is an uncertainty about the origins of the language. She ends the first stanza with words of doubt, "Nothing is certain". However there is a certainty of the mountain. "There are mountains. Oh! There are mountains". She uses the pronoun we and exclaims that they knew each and every corner of the mountain. There are several myths related

to the mountains in tribal folklore and like the other aspects of nature, their glorification is related to their invincibility and their emanation of life. The intrinsic relationship between nature and human beings is primordial and has given birth to animalistic practices and nature worship. Ancient religions of the Romans, the Egyptians, Chinese, Hindus and the Greeks had their origins in nature. In the pantheon of the Arunachali people, glorification of the mountains becomes central to their belief system. The Aztec people too believed in the immutability of the mountains and their indestructibility.

In *Voice of the Mountain*, the writer speaks like an omnipresent voice; travelling the river, the towns and the estuary mouth. Dai says that the mountain is like an old man sipping the breeze that is 'forever young'. She says that nature is like an old man who has lived many lives. His voice is like sea waves and mountain peaks. Nature transfers symbols and is a 'chance syllable that orders the world with history and miracles'. In the poem, the mountain narrates the story of its omnipresence. The opening lines, 'from where I sit on the high platform I can see the ferry lights crossing, criss-crossing the big river'. The mountain claims to be all-knowing. It sees the towns, the estuary mouth and the bank of the river. The mountains are so ancient that they can 'outline the chapters of the world'.

There is a sorrow too related to the mountains as they stand mute witnesses to the pain of an indigenous people. Despite all the slopes that have been climbed and all the familiarity with the terrain, the people cannot talk of victory yet. Why is victory elusive? The mountain takes on different forms throughout the poem and sees all that takes place in a fickle-minded universe. It is a silent witness to all the activities of human beings, the birds and the beasts and even various land forms. The mountain remains an omnipresent leitmotif throughout the poem.

*In An Obscure Place* Dai throws in a feeling of doubt:

The words of strangers have led us/into a mist deeper than the one we left behind

Weeping, like the waving grassland/where the bones of our fathers are buried/  
surrounded by thoughts of beauty. (Dai, *Muse India Archives*, Issue 8, 2006)

Who are these strangers? Are they the outsiders who infest the North- East with their alibi of livelihood and trade or are they the armed forces who push their way into the heartland? Dai is pained over them being pushed into the morass, and thus even being dislodged from their traditional environments.

Apart from the politics of the matter, the predicament of the northeastern states viv-a-vis the so called 'outsiders' is a reality that surfaces time and again.

In the poem, *Small Towns and the River* too Mamang Dai talks of the presence of the mountain even though the dominant theme is the river. The river knows the immortality of water as it sees the first drop of rain on the thirsty earth and then the same water rising as a mist on the mountain-tops. The mountain is shrouded in mystery and as it is covered in mist it gets a uniqueness of distance and enigma. Much like the invisibility of the northeastern states from the national radar, even the lofty mountains of Arunachal remain hidden in mystery from the so called mainland. The mountain as a metaphor for the mysterious, the unknown and the mighty can also be seen as representative of the resilient, the steadfast and the powerful.

The mountain speaks in different tones; sometimes as a young man and at other times as a senior citizen. The mountain recalls how a young man came from the village with a gift of fish from the river. For the mountain such an act is a repetitive one and it has seen such offerings in the past. The mountain then changes into a warrior or a hunter and leaves its spear leaning by the tree in order to 'try to make a sign'. Since the language the mountain speaks keeps changing with time, the etching with the spear is an effort at recording a truth that the mountain is aware of.

We live in territories forever ancient and new/and as we speak in changing languages/I, also, leave my spear leaning by the tree/and try to make a sign. (Dai, Poetry International)

The victory that the mountain experiences is a victory that has come after a long drawn battle. Victory cannot be spoken of prematurely. The warrior has returned with the blood of peonies. Dai is probably talking of the sun that has set.

"I am the child who died at the edge of the world/ the distance between end and hope/the star diagram that fell from the sky"

In the same poem, the poet announces that small towns always remind her of death and even though her hometown is ensconced in the trees, it has certain immutability, both in summer and in winter. She even finds that life and death too are transient and the only thing that is permanent are the rituals. Like the immutability of the mountains, ritualistic practices never die.

"Just the other day someone died. /In the dreadful silence we were

looking at the sad wreath of tuber rose/Life and death, life and death/only the rituals are permanent”

The mountain has in its recesses, memories of the sun rising and setting behind it. The sun is referred to as a child who died at the edge of the world but who will bring hope again when it rises in the east. It is also like a shooting star that has fallen from the sky. It is a summer that has brought doom to people probably because of the heat and the scanty rainfall. The mountain knows it all and is a silent witness. The mountain has also been beautifully compared to ‘a woman lost in translation’ and who still survives with the ability to be happy and carry on. The woman and the mountain are both symbolic of being lost in the quagmire of time.

It is from the mountain that so many natural processes emanate. The mountains carry wind to the mouth of the canyon which may otherwise be closed to any sort of visitation. The balmy sunlight from the mountains is thrown even to the highest tip of the trees and the mountain sends the wind even to the narrowest gorge. All these movements and memories are ensconced in the mind of the mountain. This land mass becomes symbolic of knowing even the deepest secrets and the most tormenting changes that have come about in nature. These memories hibernate in its mind and thus the mountain becomes symbolic of being a repository of traditions and events of the past. “I am the place where memory escapes/ the myth of time/ I am the sleep in the mind of the mountain”.

Owing to the nature of the mountain to be all knowing and even all powerful, several myths and folklore are centered on these lofty landmasses. Several tribes believe in the sanctity of mountains owing to their seeming invincibility and protective nature. Even the forest growth on mountains is sacred because of medicinal properties and produce used by villagers for domestic and cottage industrial purposes. Ancient Hindu mythology holds the Himalayas as the abode of Gods and *rishis* who in their mystic robes spent years of *tapasya* in order to know the truths of the universe and the mystery of *karma*. Similarly, the Australian Aborigines believe in the immutability of the Mountain. A fine example of the Australian reverence to the mountain is the Ayers Rock or the Uluru Mountain which burns in the sunlight and changes hue with the timings of the day. This rock is revered by the Aborigines and many myths and legends have been inspired by it. The Aboriginal inhabitants of Australia, the Anangu, believe the Central Australian landscape was created at the beginning of time by ancestral beings. According to Aboriginal myth, the world was ‘unformed and featureless’ until ancestral

beings emerged from the void and journeyed across the land, creating all living species and the features of the desert landscape. Uluru is regarded as spectacular physical evidence of the ancestors' activities during the creation period. Aboriginal culture has its roots in the Tjukurripa or Dreamtime, when groups of ancestral beings crossed the landscape, leaving their mark in the form of hills, creeks and caves (Sacred Destinations).

In an interview with Nilanshu Aggarwal, Mamang Dai has explicated the beliefs of union among the Arunachali tribes. She says that the traditional belief of the Adi community to which she belongs is full of respect for nature. Everything has life - rocks, stones, trees, rivers, hills, and all life is sacred. This is called Donyi- Polo, literally meaning Donyi- Sun, and Polo-moon as the physical manifestation of a supreme deity, or what she calls 'world spirit.' She thus finds several similarities between ancient Indian philosophy or ancient Mayan / Aztec, Northern Europe, Egyptian, Chinese beliefs and traditional tribal ones (Agarwal).

Thus for Mamang Dai, the mountains are not merely a landmass or a hunting ground for tribal folk; it is a living oracle of the past and the future. The symbolism behind the mountain is not merely that of ritualistic practices of an indigenous people, but a reminder of history and the protector of the races. For the people of Arunachal Pradesh a life without the mountains would probably be like a world bereft of anything aesthetic and sanctimonious. Mamang Dai stands to represent Arunachal in a certain way and tries to explore her state for the others.

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