



Indigenous Consciousness in the Writings of Mamang Dai: Land, Memory, Orality, and Cultural Identity

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Abstract: Mamang Dai occupies a significant position in contemporary Indian English literature for her distinctive articulation of the cultural world of Arunachal Pradesh and the indigenous communities of Northeast India. Her poetry and fiction transform indigenous experience from a peripheral subject into a powerful literary discourse centred on land, memory, oral tradition, mythology, spirituality, community, and cultural identity. This paper examines indigenous consciousness in Dai's writings, with particular attention to her poetry and works such as *The Legends of Pensam*, *The Black Hill*, and *The Sky Queen*. It argues that Dai's indigenous consciousness is not merely an assertion of ethnic identity but an alternative epistemological framework through which relationships among humans, nature, ancestors, spirits, history, and community are understood. Her literary imagination challenges homogenizing narratives of nation, history, development, and modernity by foregrounding local memories and oral traditions frequently excluded from written historiography. Dai's landscapes function as repositories of ancestral knowledge, while rivers, forests, mountains, animals, myths, rituals, and stories become participants in cultural remembrance. Particular emphasis is placed on her employment of oral storytelling as a strategy for preserving indigenous knowledge and recovering marginalized histories. The study further explores the tensions between tradition and modernity, written and oral cultures, centre and periphery, and indigenous knowledge and external representations. Dai neither romanticizes indigenous society nor presents it as culturally static; rather, she portrays indigenous identity as adaptive, contested, and continually reconstructed through memory and storytelling. Her writings ultimately establish literature as a space of cultural preservation and intellectual self-representation through which indigenous communities can narrate themselves rather than remain objects of external description.

Keywords: Mamang Dai, Indigenous Consciousness, Orality, Cultural Memory, Arunachal Pradesh.

Mamang Dai has emerged as one of the most compelling literary voices from Northeast India, particularly because her writings articulate indigenous experience from within a cultural landscape historically marginalized in dominant representations of Indian literature. Born in Pasighat in Arunachal Pradesh and belonging to the Adi community, Dai writes from a region characterized by extraordinary linguistic, ethnic, ecological, and cultural diversity. Her poetry, fiction, folklore, and historical narratives reveal an intense engagement with questions of identity, land, ancestry, mythology, memory, oral tradition, spirituality, colonial encounters, and cultural change. Indigenous consciousness in Dai is therefore not merely thematic. It constitutes the epistemological foundation of her literary imagination. Her writings do not simply describe indigenous people; they explore ways of seeing, remembering, narrating, and inhabiting the world

that emerge from indigenous cultural experience. The significance of this distinction becomes apparent when Dai is situated within the broader literary context of Northeast India. Robin S. Ngangom and Kynpham Singh Nongkynrih, in *Dancing Earth: An Anthology of Poetry from North-East India*, draw attention to the importance of land, myth, folklore, political experience, and cultural identity in the poetry of the region. Northeast Indian writing frequently emerges from communities whose histories have been mediated by colonial anthropology, administrative documentation, missionary narratives, nationalist discourse, and external representations. Dai's literature responds to this historical condition by creating a space of self-representation. Rather than allowing indigenous communities to remain objects of anthropological observation, she makes their memories, voices, beliefs, landscapes, and narrative traditions central to literary discourse. One of the most fundamental dimensions of Dai's indigenous consciousness is her representation of land. Arunachal Pradesh in her writings is never merely geographical scenery. Mountains, forests, rivers, stones, mist, rain, vegetation, animals, paths, and settlements constitute a living cultural geography. Indigenous identity develops through relationships with these places. Land contains stories and remembers generations. Consequently, belonging cannot be reduced to political citizenship or territorial ownership. It is produced through an intimate historical relationship between community and landscape. This relationship is particularly important because modern conceptions of territory frequently treat land as property, administrative space, or exploitable resource. Dai's indigenous imagination offers an alternative understanding: land is simultaneously ecological habitat, ancestral inheritance, cultural archive, spiritual presence, and source of identity. Such an understanding is evident throughout *The Legends of Pensam*. The book brings together interconnected narratives centred upon the Adi world of Arunachal Pradesh. The title itself carries considerable significance. "Pensam" suggests an in-between or middle space, and Dai's narrative continually inhabits borders between past and present, myth and history, oral and written cultures, the natural and supernatural, tradition and modernity. The stories do not follow a conventional linear narrative structure. Instead, they accumulate through memories, encounters, legends, fragments, and voices. This structure resembles the processes of oral storytelling through which communal knowledge is transmitted across generations. Dai thus does not merely reproduce indigenous stories in English; she allows the logic of oral culture to shape the literary form itself. Orality is central to indigenous consciousness because communities without extensive traditions of written historiography have often preserved their collective knowledge through stories, songs, myths, rituals, genealogies, and memories. Walter J. Ong's influential study *Orality and Literacy* demonstrates that oral cultures develop distinctive modes of storing and transmitting knowledge. In Dai, storytelling functions as a form of cultural archive. The storyteller becomes a custodian of collective memory, and narrative becomes an instrument of survival. The transformation of oral narratives into written literature is nevertheless complex. Writing can preserve stories threatened by cultural change, but it can also remove them from their original performative contexts. Dai negotiates this tension by maintaining qualities of oral narration—repetition, fragmentation, communal voices, myths, anecdotal structures, and shifts between ordinary and supernatural experience. Her English therefore becomes a medium through which indigenous knowledge enters global literary circulation without completely surrendering its local cultural foundations. Myth constitutes another essential component of Dai's indigenous consciousness. Modern rationalist thought frequently separates myth from history and categorizes the former as fictional or primitive. Dai refuses such hierarchy. Myth possesses cultural truth because it preserves how communities understand origins, relationships, places, natural phenomena, death, spirituality, and social obligations. Her writing does not ask whether every myth is empirically verifiable. Instead, it asks what the myth remembers and what forms of knowledge it carries. This approach challenges the dominance of written history as the only legitimate mode of understanding the past. Indigenous memory often exists precisely where official archives remain silent. Dai's literature consequently participates in what may be understood as a recovery of marginalized histories. In *The Black Hill*, this recovery assumes a particularly historical form. The novel revisits nineteenth-century encounters among indigenous communities, Tibetan regions, colonial officials, and Christian missionaries. Rather than

presenting the Northeast merely as a distant frontier of British India, Dai re-centres indigenous experience. Mountains, paths, villages, political alliances, customary practices, and local understandings of territory determine the narrative world. Colonial expansion is therefore perceived from the landscape that colonial discourse had traditionally represented as peripheral. This reversal of perspective is politically significant. Edward Said's analysis of representation in *Orientalism* demonstrates how imperial knowledge often constructs colonized societies as objects to be described, classified, and governed. Although Dai's historical and cultural context differs from Said's principal examples, her literary practice similarly contests externally produced representations by allowing indigenous landscapes and communities to become subjects of narration. Indigenous consciousness in Dai also manifests itself through spirituality. The world represented in her writings does not necessarily maintain rigid boundaries between material and spiritual existence. Rivers, mountains, forests, animals, dreams, ancestors, and supernatural presences may participate in the same cultural reality. Such representations should not be dismissed as superstition, for they express an ontology in which human existence is interconnected with multiple forms of being. This relational worldview challenges modern anthropocentrism and Cartesian distinctions between mind and matter, human and nature, rational and supernatural. Graham Harvey's discussion of animism is useful in this context because contemporary approaches increasingly understand indigenous animistic traditions not simply as belief in spirits but as relational systems founded upon respect, communication, and reciprocal responsibilities among different forms of existence. Dai's indigenous world similarly emphasizes relationship rather than human superiority. Nature and indigenous consciousness are consequently inseparable in her work. Forests and rivers do not merely provide material resources; they are incorporated into stories, rituals, memories, and identities. Ecological destruction can therefore become cultural destruction. When a forest disappears, the loss may include not only trees and animals but place-names, myths, medicinal knowledge, sacred associations, oral histories, and traditional practices. This connection makes Dai's indigenous consciousness particularly relevant to contemporary environmental humanities. Her writing demonstrates that biodiversity and cultural diversity frequently exist together and may be threatened by the same processes of modernization, displacement, and resource extraction. Cultural memory forms another crucial dimension of Dai's writing. Jan Assmann distinguishes cultural memory from individual memory by emphasizing the ways communities preserve collective identity through symbols, narratives, rituals, and traditions. Dai's literary works perform a comparable function. They record memories that exceed individual biography and belong to generations. Elders, ancestors, storytellers, and community traditions create continuity between past and present. Memory is not simply nostalgia; it is a means of cultural survival. Dai writes because forgetting has consequences. When younger generations lose stories about their land, ancestors, customs, and beliefs, they risk losing interpretive frameworks through which community identity has historically been sustained. Yet Dai does not portray tradition as fixed or untouched. This is an important aspect of her indigenous consciousness. Her communities experience education, Christianity, colonialism, roads, bureaucracy, modern political institutions, migration, and changing aspirations. Indigenous identity therefore exists in dialogue with historical transformation. *The Legends of Pensam* particularly captures this sense of transition. Traditional beliefs coexist with modern institutions; memories coexist with contemporary realities. Dai avoids the romantic stereotype of the indigenous community as timeless and isolated from history. Such romanticization can itself become another form of external representation. Instead, she portrays indigenous people as modern subjects negotiating continuity and change. The tension between centre and periphery also informs Dai's writing. Northeast India has often been represented within national discourse through geographical remoteness, conflict, borders, tribal identities, or exotic landscapes. Dai challenges the language of marginality by making Arunachal Pradesh the imaginative centre of her literature. From within her texts, places conventionally regarded as metropolitan centres become distant, while villages, rivers, mountains, and indigenous communities become central. This reversal has important literary consequences. It questions who possesses the authority to define centre and margin. Indigenous consciousness becomes an assertion of epistemic location:

the world can be narrated from Pasighat and the Siang region just as legitimately as it can be narrated from metropolitan cultural centres. Language creates another productive tension. Dai writes primarily in English, a language historically associated in India with colonialism, education, administration, and elite literary culture. Yet she employs English to preserve and communicate indigenous stories. This apparent paradox characterizes much postcolonial writing. Ngũgĩ wa Thiong'o has famously emphasized the relationship between language and cultural power, while other postcolonial writers have appropriated colonial languages for local expression. Dai's English carries the conceptual world of indigenous Arunachal Pradesh into Indian and international literature. Local words, myths, place-names, cultural concepts, narrative rhythms, and indigenous memories disrupt the assumption that English necessarily carries only Western experience. The language is made to accommodate another world. Women also occupy an important place in Dai's indigenous imagination. Female characters frequently participate in memory, family, community relationships, labour, suffering, storytelling, and cultural continuity. Their experiences reveal histories that official narratives may overlook. Yet Dai does not construct indigenous women merely as symbols of tradition. They encounter desire, violence, uncertainty, social obligations, change, and personal agency. Through them, indigenous consciousness becomes embodied and lived rather than abstract. The domestic and everyday acquire historical importance because community survival depends not only upon major political events but upon ordinary acts of remembering, nurturing, speaking, working, and transmitting knowledge. Dai's engagement with indigenous consciousness can further be understood through the concept of decolonization. Decolonization in literature does not only mean opposition to historical colonial rule; it also involves challenging epistemological hierarchies that classify indigenous knowledge as primitive, irrational, folkloric, or inferior. Dai accomplishes this quietly rather than polemically. She places myths beside history, oral memories beside written archives, spiritual knowledge beside modern rationality, and indigenous landscapes beside nationally recognized historical spaces. She does not demand that indigenous knowledge be validated by external epistemologies before entering literature. Its legitimacy emerges from the communities and relationships that sustain it. This is one of the most radical aspects of her literary practice. *The Sky Queen* further demonstrates Dai's commitment to recovering indigenous narrative traditions. By reworking mythic and folkloric materials, she enables traditional narratives to enter contemporary literary circulation. Such retellings are not simply acts of preservation. They involve reinterpretation. Every written reconstruction of oral tradition creates a dialogue between inherited knowledge and present circumstances. Indigenous consciousness therefore becomes dynamic rather than archival. The past speaks to the present, while the present reinterprets the past. This process ensures that tradition remains alive rather than becoming a museum object. Ultimately, Dai's indigenous consciousness can be understood through four interconnected ideas: land, memory, orality, and relationality. Land provides the material and spiritual ground of identity; memory connects generations; oral traditions preserve communal knowledge; and relationality positions humans within networks involving nature, ancestors, spirits, animals, and community. These elements combine to produce an alternative vision of modern existence. Against cultural homogenization, Dai asserts specificity. Against historical forgetting, she offers memory. Against anthropocentric separation from nature, she offers ecological kinship. Against externally imposed descriptions of indigenous communities, she offers self-representation. Her writing is therefore simultaneously literary and culturally restorative. Mamang Dai's importance extends beyond the representation of Arunachal Pradesh. Her work contributes to wider debates concerning indigenous knowledge, decolonization, environmental ethics, cultural diversity, oral tradition, and the politics of representation. In a globalizing world where smaller languages, traditional ecological knowledge, oral cultures, and localized identities face increasing pressures, Dai demonstrates the role literature can play in sustaining cultural memory without freezing culture into an idealized past. Her indigenous communities are neither relics of premodernity nor exotic subjects for metropolitan consumption. They are historically situated communities possessing sophisticated systems of memory, knowledge, spirituality, environmental relationship, and storytelling. Indigenous consciousness in Dai thus becomes a mode of intellectual



reclamation. Through literature, communities conventionally represented from outside acquire the authority to narrate their own landscapes, histories, memories, and worlds. Her writings finally suggest that preserving indigenous identity does not mean refusing change; it means ensuring that change does not require forgetting. In giving literary permanence to stories carried by mountains, forests, rivers, ancestors, and generations of storytellers, Mamang Dai transforms indigenous memory into a powerful contemporary discourse of identity, belonging, and cultural survival.

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