



THE INTERSECTIONS OF MYTH AND HISTORY IN MAMANG DAI'S *ESCAPING THE LAND*

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RESEARCH ARTICLE



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Abstract

The North East India has been often conceived and imagined as a watershed of political insurgency and pristine geographical beauty. This region has been almost like an experimental battleground for India's Look East and Act East policies. While these policies aimed to consolidate the ties and cultural exchange between India and the South Eastern region of Asia, the geographical position of the North Eastern States made them an integral aide to the implementation of these policies. The NER vision document that was formulated in this regard in December 2020 focused on six main components of development which includes self-governance and participatory development as one of its objectives. However, in reality, these states have just been confined in close boxes of predetermined notion about them. In conjunction with the volatile political circumstances of this region, are the extremely rich myths and folklores which add another dimension to the identity of these people. This article seeks to analyse Mamang Dai's book *Escaping the Land* in close context to the above considerations. In this book, Mamang Dai combines history, myth and contemporary politics that captures the turbulence and struggle of the beautiful land and its people. She traces the trajectory of her narrative from Kojum-Koja, a sacred place beyond time, an unknown frontier to the formation of the modern state of Arunachal Pradesh. The constant conflict between the old thoughts and contemporary views, the absolute need for memorising myths, recording history as well as being politically aware of their situation, forms the praxis of this book. The article will hence try to explore the point of negotiation and connect between the sacrosanct entity of the folklores and the evolving narratives of political history of this region as found in the book. The theoretical lens for this understanding and analysis will be the post-colonial ideas of nation formation as well as ideas of borders and margins that operate to form a nation state.

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Introduction

The wonder that is North East India might be imagined as a land of paradoxes and conflicts. Where on one hand, it is celebrated for its pristine natural landscape, on the other hand it is also seen as a land of tribal insurgencies and conflicts. The writers who hail from this region, have portrayed this ongoing contest through their works. One such writer who finds a prominent voice is Mamang Dai. In the oeuvre of works, both fiction and non-fiction, poems and novels that she has published, she serves as an ethnic chronicler of her land, Arunachal Pradesh. She belongs to the Mishmi tribe of Arunachal Pradesh. She has served as an Administrative Officer, a journalist and has been awarded the prestigious Sahitya Akademi Award in 2017 for her novel, *The Black Hill*. She uses her role as an author effectively by projecting the oral narratives, indigenous traditions and customs and blending them with the contemporary historical discourse of nation formation. *Escaping the Land* is one such work where she combines myth, folklores and history and draws a trajectory which leads to the evolving narratives of contemporary political situations. She is acutely aware of the need to preserve the indigenous heritage and oral narratives so that they do not lead to an erasure of their culture.

Objectives: The objectives of this study are the following:

- i. To situate Arunachal Pradesh in the aftermath of NEFA, Look East and Act East policies.
- ii. To analyse and discuss what does nationalism and nation building imply with context to Arunachal Pradesh in the postcolonial times and its insurgent, internal strife and politics.
- iii. To analyse the various myths that permeate the cultural fabric of Arunachal Pradesh.
- iv. To study the interlinking of myth and history in the text and analyse their significant role in nation building.

Methodology: The proposed article is a qualitative study of the novel *Escaping the Land*. It will include Post-Colonial theories and ideas about nation, borders, margins as the theoretical lens for the purpose of this study.

Discussion

In an article titled “Arunachal Pradesh: The Myth of Tranquillity”, Mamang Dai observes, “In the sea of rising ethnic violence and political ferment that is India’s North East, Arunachal Pradesh is generally thought of an island of undisturbed peace. This is however no more than a myopic view from a distance, and one that allows cumulative failures of governance, and of the State’s developmental and welfare programmes, to be brushed under the carpet, even as the increasing political ferment an emerging insurgency and the rising potential for ethnic and communal violence are ignored...” (Dai). The statement makes a mighty remark about the pristine beauty that is generally associated with the geographical space of Arunachal Pradesh. In her acclaimed work, *The Legends of Pensam*, Dai posits Arunachal Pradesh in a strategic “in between ness” (Dai) amidst the intersection of myth and political history. She expresses her concern over carrying on with the rich legacy of oral and folk tales as much as she is aware of the evolving, contemporary socio-political situation. It appears as a conscious aim to uphold a mirror of political awareness in this land still shrouded with myths, mysteries and legends. The British had introduced the Bengal Eastern frontier Regulation of 1973 for the North East Frontier tracts almost as an isolationist policy to apparently with an intention to preserve the indigeneity of the tribal people. The inner line permit that was formulated in this regard, prohibited the entry of British subjects (which was replaced by the term “citizens of India” post-independence) into such restricted or protected areas. (ILP Arunachal Pradesh). The birth of Arunachal Pradesh from North East Frontier Agency to a Union Territory on January 20, 1972 was a well deliberated administrative step. This background study brings clearly to our notice that Arunachal Pradesh as well as the other parts of North East India were segregated from the mainstream since the very inception. We must also bear in mind, that Arunachal Pradesh’s strategic geographical position, had made it a viable experimental ground for India’s “Look East” and “Act East” policies. The NER vision document formulated in this regard in December 2020 focused on six main components of development among which self-governance and participatory development was one of the objectives. (Anthony 1)

Parallel to this geo-political identity of the region, exists the mythopoeic idea about the birth of Arunachal Pradesh, “Kojum-Koja” a land beyond time, a sacred space interspersed with its own stories and legends. Here in this land, the rules of the outer world seem to have no validity; it is a sacrosanct entity in itself that preserves the ancient ways of life with extreme care. Their beliefs in the natural ways of the green forests, their ability to read signals and omens from natural phenomenon is very strongly rooted within their ways of life. The hills are home nurturing and preserving their authenticity and ingenious identity. It will therefore be not wrong to assume that there is an intrinsic duality of identity that operates in the mind of these people; they are at once the consequence of an inclusion as well as an exclusion from the rest of the geographical entity marked as India. The study wishes to analyse the ways in which *Escaping the Land* traces the trajectory of this existence from myth to modernity.

Mamang Dai had earlier explored this interweaving of myth and history in *The Black Hill* (2014) which highlights the fact that awareness is not a sudden conjecture; it is a hard stinging reality. *Escaping the Land* (2021) adds to the already existing paradigms of ideas, a more contemporary outlook and approach. It perhaps tries to understand the evolved notion of home and space with a more present day thought. The book is divided in five parts – Time, Memory, Insurgency, The Fall, The Dice is Cast. Book one, Time, begins with the visit of Maying and her desire to interview the veteran politician, Lutor in order to know more about the ongoings of politics in the state. Maying has been away for years, and has come back to chronicle the history of the people who have shaped this land she knew as home. She finds Lutor’s journal named “NEFA notebook”; reminiscent of what the state once was. Before it was renamed and granted the status of a Union Territory, Arunachal Pradesh (then known as NEFA) was a conglomerated region of three sections – the Ballipara Frontier Tract, the Lakhimpur Frontier Tract and the Sadiya Frontier Tract. (Choudhury). The chapters of the first book trace the succession of political activities which eventually lead to the formation of the new state. Mamang Dai presents in vivid details the strife and struggle of the people who were battling grave circumstances in order to survive and keep themselves safe from the Chinese Army. The acts of violence within the boundaries of NEFA had already drawn much bad blood. The people of the region were at loggerheads with the administration because of the Aching Mori incident and the Abor War. Several people were killed and massacred. During the Anglo Abor War (1858-1912) the tribals with their bamboo arrows and stone catapults fought with fierce vehemence the modern weaponry of the British Army. The war ended with a violent incident that involved the killing of two Englishmen, the British Army took avenged it by burning down the entire village of the Abor tribe. Abor, we must note here, is an Assamese word which means “independent”. They are the Adi people who follow “Donyi polo”, the religion of sun and moon. Their very existence is thus hyphenated with the forces of nature. We find that Lutor himself is the son of a shaman, a woman, who possess magical power. The villagers offer sacrifice for her powers to be taken away, the powers are then transferred to his uncle, who everyone acknowledges as the ‘rainman’. Lutor possess by way of inheritance, some of the powers which makes him more astute about understanding his people amidst critical situations. He is brought away from his village by Lipun who is an officer in the regiment. He is a man of the world, with varied experiences, educated in Assam. He notes with regret that he knows more about Assam and Shillong than his own place and own tribe. This sense of disappointment is not his alone. Anyone who was looking at providing a better future to their children, was sending them to Shillong, a more peaceful habitat, away from the insurgent tribal areas. Interestingly, Lipun writes in his notebook few lines about who they were and what they have become. These lines seem to echo the truth about the entire existence of the tribal people. He names it “Learning” and notes the things they have heard about their newly emerged identity: “... We are Indians...NEFA is a part of India... We belong to a Scheduled Tribe...” (Dai 46). NEFA is the acronym for North East Frontier Agency, the erstwhile name for Arunachal Pradesh before it gained the status of Union Territory. He mentions specifically that

New Delhi is the new centre of power as the capital of India. The relation between the centre and the state has already been delineated: that of the government and the governed, the majority and the marginalised. Their identity is not organically evolved from their primitive idea of existence. Lipun notes again, “What did we hear before this? There is the land of Kojum-Koja. It was a famous civilization. We came from there... We own this land so that we may rest here... NEFA is the land of fittest survivors”. (Dai 46-47). This sense of ownership over their land, the sense of belonging is also an emotional security in such turbulent times. Their ancient civilisation is sacred to them; it roots them within the very heart of nature. They believe that “the hills are safe for us.” (Dai 34) This land holds importance to them as a site which offers a common indigenous identity. J. Armstrong, in his ethno-symbolic approach to nationalism, is of the opinion that myths and symbols are significant markers of political identity in the pre modern times. He further argues that the recital of myths can “enhance the salience of boundary perception.” (Armstrong 9) He thinks that it is significant way to generate an awareness among the members of the group or tribes regarding their common fate. (ibid). Their dreams find relevance in two ways – as a projection of their sub conscious mind and as a shadow of their immediate reality. Lutor’s father, Lomey, has the dream of a knife blade the day the child is born. However, his job as a political interpreter does not allow let him to stay back and celebrate the birth of his newly born son and he goes against all omens to report back to duty. The political interpreter is expected to form a liaison between the government officers and the tribesmen. Dai writes, “They spoke a mixture of dialect, Hindi and Assamese. Sometimes it happened that another interpreter was needed to interpret the interpreters...” (Dai 11) highlighting the various dialects that the different tribes spoke. They did not have one common, standard language; their speech was as varied as their culture. The new government was already formulating cartographical changes to demarcate this specific region from the rest of the India. Whether or not the people grasped the significance of the newly drafted rules and regulations, they assimilated few terms in their daily life such as naming a new born daughter as NEPHA (a linguistic distortion of NEFA), or naming their children after Indian and British politicians like Mac Mohan, Gandhi, Assam, Bharat, Sitwell etc. The tribes were sceptical about the infiltration of government in their lives; they guard their land with every fibre of strength they have. On one hand there is the threat of being attacked by the Chinese army, on the other hand, there is a suspicion about letting the government interfere with their land and life. The boons of modern science and technology that the new government might bring, is hardly of any relevance to them. Their belief in the supernatural ways of omens and shamans is too strong to be shaken or altered. Lutor’s uncle, the “rainman” says “... But whatever may happen you must realise your place: In between the world of spirits and men, hanging by a thread- the soul of man!” (Dai 50) The in between ness is emphasised yet again.

The restrictive actions of the government were not limited to marking a separate geographical space alone. The inner turmoil and acts of violence within the state led them to form a regulatory framework to restrict the trespassing of these hilly, forest areas by the people living outside its borders. The Inner Line Permit had already been enforced. Neeladri Bhattacharya and Joy L.K. Pachau observe, “The line separated the inside and the outside, the plains and the hills, the settled and the mobile, the field and the forest, the normal and the exceptional. In defining the plains as the site of the normal, it classified the hills as the site of the non-normative; in looking at the peasants as integrated to the civilizational process, it separated the ‘tribal’ communities as wild and savage.” (Bhattacharya and Pachau 4.) We can read as a corollary to this permit, that the laws and regulations of the rest of the country were not to be applied to these regions. It was almost a system of self-governance with the tribal chiefs at helm. The “outsiders” comfortably and conveniently glossed over the insurgent actions within the state as it suited their objective to label Arunachal Pradesh as “the land of peace”. Mamang Dai in an article on Arunachal Pradesh, writes, that because of the remoteness and historical isolation of the place, it is almost a “forgotten land” and the people do not have a clear idea about what operates within the borders. She thinks that this general lack of information and unfamiliarity about the region can provide the people in governance concerned with the welfare of the state “a great deal of immunity and absence of accountability regarding their actions and the real state of affairs”. (Dai) Peace was more imagined than it actually prevailed. Any talks of the deplorable state of affairs would be brushed under the carpet: the building and development of infrastructure was the solution that was offered in place of conflict resolution.

In addition to the crisis of internal strife and conflict caused by the militant groups, Dai also talks about the presence of local mafia and extortionists who were trying to capitalise the resources of the land like tea, timber and thread by joining hands with the traders and industrialists. We see the character of Tanik, whose birth was as mysterious as the man himself. He has been introduced as “the mythmaker.” A magical story surrounded about how he suddenly gained the favour of a visiting spirit, a woman, who made love to him, in a surreal experience. She instructed him to honour her brothers when they visit him and he shall be rewarded. So, it happens. Tanik is visited again by a storm, a gust of wind and when it is over, he finds heaps of “tadoks”, precious beads in the hut. Tadoks were not only the highest symbol of wealth, they were also of use to the shamans who could make predictions by counting them. Tanik, like Lutor, had never seen his father, only heard about him. His mother had provided him education by using an age-old skill of weaving clothes and selling them. It is with a sense of wonder that we note how the local culture and skills have been mentioned here as ways of earning money. The rainman believes that it is the love of the land that will sustain them. This is perhaps one of the ways to honour the local tradition and culture. It is like a symbiotic relationship between the people and their land of Kojum Koj., The stereotypical representation of these communities is what Easterine Kire warns us against, “Beware of accepted discourse. What is accepted discourse? It is discourse on stereotypes of a culture, of a race, generalisations made about a community that are accepted unquestioningly. Accepted discourse is about accepting constructed identities. (Kire) Their skills and artefacts are given the tag of “exotic” only to market them better. The craft centres which were set up by the NEFA government employed local women of the tribe to weave and produce cloth and other articles which will attract the attention of the tourists. The weaving analogy has been employed by Mamang Dai in *Hembreelmai’s Loom*, where she

presents the folktale about how the Mishmi people learnt to weave such colourful clothes. To Tanik's mother, her loom is just a way of earning money for her child. Education was the only way towards a better future and the future lied outside the land. Hence, the primitive art gains a modern, capitalist currency apart from its cultural value. Tanik explored his fortune in timber trade and went one to become even the chief minister; this is where the mythmaker becomes the policy maker as well.

As we are confronted with the newly emerging political structure, Dai shows us the real nature of trouble that encompasses insurgency. An ensuing battle between preserving the environment and need for modern infrastructure leaves the tribal people at a crossroad of choosing the better way of life. The future generations cannot engage in eulogising the cragged, primitive existence; they are searching for well drafted rules, regulations and modern ways of living. The tribes cannot agree to a homogenous identity simply because they vastly vary in their culture and thus in their "ethnic boundaries" (Frederik Barth's term). The leaders like Lutor and Tanik are caught up in the web of administrative policies and Bills such as Arunachal Pradesh Control of Organised Crime Act (APCOCA). It was enacted on August 23,2002 with an aim "to prevent and control, and also to cope with criminal activities perpetrated by organised crime syndicates and gangs and matters or incidents related to such activities.". The Act, in a very surreptitious way branded the tribes as "terrorists" who can be controlled by the intervention of armed forces; it did not concern itself with the welfare of the people. Perhaps it was a definition of what the centre thought about the state. The numerous meetings at New Delhi between the representatives of centre and state led to no progressive development. Lutor remarks, "Surely, we have something to offer to New Delhi. We have given something in the past: something of the land, apiece to history to add to the map. (Dai 156). There is a greater question which looms large regarding who influences public opinion; an extension of the question might be who, in this case are considered to be the public- the tribal people or the government officials and thereby whose opinion would be valued. During elections, Lutor, the veteran politician, a prominent leader of the tribe, is defeated in his own region, by the new government because of the changing dynamics of politics that relies more on the power of money than on the power of common consensus. We might consider here, what then is the idea of a national space to these people. Their contribution to India's history cannot be shelved as a sporadic episode of subaltern history. Their fight seems to be a constant search for approval and validation as also of integration and assimilation within the dominant narrative of history. The people like Lutor, Lipun, Tanik, Maying, Umsi who have received a formal education are engaged in a postcolonial catalytic exchange which enables them to form new identities. They are adapting to influx and changes sometimes going against their own people. The fashionable lifestyle of Delhi, the tea and chocolate almond cake, becomes the social marker of sophistication and civilization in contrast to the savage wilderness of their homeland. The Look East policy which was formulated in 1991 with an objective to improve communication and undertake several cross-border developments included the North Eastern region in the strategic position of a gateway as it shared a common border with China, Bangladesh, Japan and Myanmar on various sides. The extension of this policy as Act East policy in 2014, further sought to emphasise on three C's -commerce, culture, connectivity.

Any development comes with a price and in the case of this land, human sacrifice. The reference to such sacrifice has been mentioned several times in the text. Often, these are seen as primitive, cultural rites which must be performed to attain an objective. The rainman brings rain only when the junior shaman is scorched to death by some mysterious way. Tanik gains wealth only when the spirit brothers take Kakir, the brave hunter, as their sacrificial offering. Lutor's son dies mysteriously, Nepha dies of malaria. In their constant struggle with China, Myanmar and Tibet, several tribal people are massacred. Peace comes at the cost of bloodshed. The idea about death is accompanied with a sense of resignation to fate; to believe in the primordial ways of nature. In the realm of changing ideology, money becomes the new omnipotent force. The people are silenced with money while the forest areas are being burned down, the mafias trade the local, natural resources for money. Guma, an impostor of a monk, threatens the people to pay him five lakh rupees if they want their village to be protected from all prying evil eyes. The simple beliefs of the people become the tools of extortion. The people submit and surrender not only to protect themselves from the shamanic powers but also from the government who is ready to hunt them down under any pretext.

Conclusion

It might thus be said in conclusion, that *Escaping the Land* thus encapsulates the journey of the people from nature to nation. The Mongoloid features of these people often cause them to be mistaken as Chinese; their identity as Indians is under constant scrutiny from the fellow residents of mainland India. They preserve in their common consciousness, the pride and legacy of Kojum Kojia, "the first civilization from where man began his journey..." (Dai 90) They bear in their minds the promise of love and hope, blessed by the earth's bounty. Juxtaposed with this cultural identity, is their political identity as militants and tribal people who are to speak in Aijaz Ahmed's terms, in India but not quite Indians. The cultural and political hybridity gives more valency to their idea of home and land. Their journey is an evolution from the derogatory terrains of "tribals" to the horizons of being accepted as significant participants in the policy making processes of the Government.

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