

Indigenous Rhythms in Mamang Dai's *The Black Hill*

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Abstract

*Indigenous rhythms are new genre which mainly focuses on tribal literature. Indigenous people are referred as tribal in India, are ethnic group of people whose members share a cultural identity that has been shaped by their geographical region and they generally regarded as the original inhabitants of a territory or region. Indigeneity displays a strong association between people and their rootedness to their surroundings, material or emotional connection to the land. The bioregionalist thinkers and practitioners help human beings to reconnect themselves with the land and places because they are part of them and without them survival is not possible. Mamang Dai belongs to Arunachal Pradesh, a state inhabiting Northeast India. Her novel *The Black Hill* captures the forgotten tales and terror of history in the Abor and Mishmi hills. The novel covers the time and space of both the pre-colonial and the post-colonial world. By this she gives a glimpse of the changing situations and atmosphere of the places which is an interesting part of the study.*

*Land is considered as a precious asset, sacred and revered among the tribal people of Northeast India. The land is not simply a surface but it is a home and pride of the tribal people. Even before the period of colonization, different tribes were at war with each other because of land inheritance, fishing and hunting. The love for their native land which they called home is the first thing the people protected when the British troops *migluns* tried to take possession as unused underused or empty-areas of rational deficit. This study focuses on the land, folklore, language, presence of evil, status of women and resistance of foreign rules.*

Keywords: Indigenous, Northeast India, Tribal, Land, Foreign Rules.

The Black Hill looks at the Abor and Mishmi people of Arunachal Pradesh and their relation with the *migluns*. The study is concentrated on the tribal people, their land and rich ecology, resistance against colonialism and their folk life. The invasion of the *migluns* has made the tribal people to lose many of their good values, traditions and lands. Thus, they vowed to protect their rich cultural at all cost and resist colonialism because they were able to govern themselves. The theme of protecting the land remained as one of the most important subjects. This is one of oldest values of the tribal people of Arunachal Pradesh. Under this, we see two contrasting views, one from the tribal people and the other from *migluns*. For the tribal people of the Abor and Mishmi, land is not only a space that gives them the basis for survival; it serves as an identity and gives power and recognition to the people who owned it. But the uglier side of land results in bloodshed and tribal unrest. On the other hand, the *migluns* see the native land as an empty space that is occupied by uncivilized people that need to be civilized. The natural objects like the forests, trees, rivers, sky and moon are treated with respect by the people because they are believe

to be interrelated. In nature, they were healed of their sicknesses and worries.

The Black Hill, one of the finest novels of Mamang Dai, was published in 2014. The novel is set in 1840 and 1850 in the state of Arunachal Pradesh inhabiting Northeast India, it focused on the historical contact between the British and some tribes of Arunachal Pradesh. As the post colonial writers invented their own styles, methods and ways to tell their own stories, they also control their own narratives and narrate their history and unique culture in their writings. By this, they make use of native expressions, metaphor, symbols, and speeches which give a sense of post-colonial writing. The present novel combines both native and western literary styles in presenting the cultural history of the Abor and Mishmi tribes and their relation with the *migluns*. The Abor and Mishmi tribes of Arunachal Pradesh occupied a major place in the story. The term Abor is the old name of the Adi tribe.

The three characters, Gimur, Kajinsha and Father Krick belonged to different regions, culture and religion, but they were brought together in their destiny. In crossing each other's path, they try to understand one another but it turned out to be a failure. All of them wanted to do good in different ways that is, protecting their native land from foreign invaders, to spread the hood news of the gospel, and to live life to the fullest. They were successful in their mission and dreams up to some extent but untimely death and tragedies crashed their lives. The ordinary lives of the tribal people were disrupted by the expedition of the soldiers in the hilly regions.

As the tribal people like the Mishmi and Abor lived an independent life, they protested against the invasion of foreigners in their land. However, their attitude of resistance towards the *migluns* or whites differs from clan to clan. In spite of the efforts made by some chiefs and clans in combating against the *migluns*, it remained largely unsuccessful as some of the leaders, like, Marpa and Lamet, conspired against their own people with the *migluns* which in turn, stirs inter-tribal conflict.

The coming of the French priest, Father Nicholas Krick, into the Mishmi was faced with strong oppositions from the people because they knew, by experience, that once an upliftment is made in certain field, the *migluns* will occupy their lands and other domains as well. Thus, Father Krick could not accomplish his aim of spreading the gospel in Tibet, since the only route available for him to reach Tibet can be made through the Mishmi hills. His dream was thwarted many times by the tribal people who were suspicious of his mission. However, not everything ended in vain as he was able to heal and influence some tribal Mishmi people who applauded his good works.

The colonizers dominate the non-human nature by introducing their own ideas and renovations over the indigenous lands. The tribal people and their close bond with the land through their beliefs and practices were either prevented or no longer practiced with the process of colonization. The indigenous lands were taken away by the colonizers for the purpose of farming, industrialization, and construction of recreational places. New concepts and terms alien to indigenous people like, private property and desacralisation, replaced the indigenous concept of land. This dispossessed the indigenous people of their lands and their land rights.

The dominance of the ecology by the colonialists weakened the indigenous people beliefs and reverence for nature in some ways. As the sacred things like the trees, forests, mountains, and others were taken away from them from which they derived their beliefs and survival from them. The western understanding of space includes architectural space, physical space, psychological space and theoretical space. These concepts have altered the indigenous world view and its space. The indigenous space was devalued and the colonizers saw it as something that can be dominated or controlled. For example, land which was taken as a living being by the tribal people was perceived by the colonizers as something that can be tamed and beautified. These acts changed the original and natural landscape which the tribal people and the naive people derived their legends, myths and beliefs from it.

The tribal communities had independence and autonomy over their lands, resources and political life. However, these were altered under the British rule and further continued with the post-independence of India. The tribal people prioritize their ecology, and they reflect this in their speech, activities, and in their daily life. The natural ecosystem is also a habitat of their rites and rituals. A land can keep the people together, but it can also make them to shed blood for it. However, not all the people of the Abor and Mishmi tribes shared the same goal of keeping their land intact, some self-centred people were ready to open the way of their land to the white men. This resulted in a long enmity between chief Lamet and Kajinsha's clan.

As Gimur was climbing through the steep hills to settle down with Kajinsha in the black hill, she could not comprehend the meaning and value of land which different people had spoken about over and over again. Men claimed land as a possession and owned the stream, the jungle, the rocks, the big trees, the mountains, and the rivers. The other side of ownership was ugly and dangerous as men fought and killed each other for land. Brothers became enemies over land. Gimur perceived the dual existence of love and ferocity that people have for land and this perplexed her because she saw no meaning in it. The shaman explained the meaning of land that it belonged to the people and it carried the soul of their ancestors. Thus, without it people will not be able to survive on their own. Later on, Gimur perceived the value of land like her mother who used to say that the land was everything. The land and herself could not be separated because they are one. This identification with the land answered her life's question.

A great chief who prioritizes his native land above other things is none other than Kajinsha's father. He was a peace loving man who desired peace in his land, but this was thwarted by the invasion of the *migluns*. Some clans showed the way of their land to the *migluns*, and this enraged Kajinsha's father and his clans. In order to retaliate against the *migluns* and the tribal people who helped the former, Kajinsha's father and his clans took the help of their neighbour, the Tibetans. In return for the Tibetans' help, the uncle of Kajinsha promised to protect and guard the land of the Tibetans so that no stranger would be allowed to cross Tibet via the Mishme hills. This pact was upheld till the days of Kajinsha. Kajinsha, like Gimur, could not understand the value of land. His father, a wise and peaceful chief, explained the meaning of land to him that it symbolizes "ownership" and "rest".

In an encounter with Father Krick, Kajinsha gave a powerful insight as to the belief of his people with regard to the land. They "read the land" because it is their "book", and everything on the hill is a living being and the voices of rain, thunder and lightning are the voices of spirits speaking to them. From them, the people learnt the good and the bad. They have been living in this manner for hundreds of year. Nature and the ecology are treated with a voice and life. The anthropocentric behaviour was discarded and it calls for an equal balance of men and nature. The Angami-Nagas also considered sky, that is, *tei*, as their father, and earth, that is *Kiju*, as their mother. The native worldview of nature is not anthropocentric. In fact, the people believe in the affinity of men, nature and the celestial beings. Kajinsha also related a story told to him by his father to the priest, that everything on earth and sky is connected since they are born from the same mother.

Human beings belong to the land and the land is mother. They respect the land and take what they only need. Animals & trees offer themselves to men. In short, human beings and land help each other to survive. Men do not act as superior to the animals or trees but they co-exist with each other. Before the period of colonialism, even though tribes like, the Abor and Mishmi fought within themselves for land possessions, the reasons were different from the colonizers who possess land for economic and political benefits. The period of colonial rule engulfed the land strife in native geographies.

Kajinsha and Gimur were true patriots of their land. Their "unspoken pact" (262) was to defend their land in the hands of the enemies and to give their life for the cause of it. Kajinsha's last unfulfilled wish was to start his life again in the black hill, his home, as the same person. In his land, he has everything that he required and he derived his belief and survival from it. He was called as a

savage for his belief and love shown towards his land. His stay in the prison denies his contact with the open space. However, on the day of his trial, he was brought out from the prison and was made to stand under the open sky. This made him numb to the beatings and the cursing of men towards him.

Kajinsha has great love for his land and called it as home. He was a man with many names, a sinner, shaman, priest, lama and legend which mingled into one. Kajinsha loathed violence like his father and he longed for peace & wanted to be loved. However, *migluns* failed to understand him and his love for his land. There is nothing wrong in dreaming and desiring to stay at one's own hill, one's abode, this considered as a crime when Kajinsha was wrongly convicted of murder and was hanged.

The status of women in tribal societies differed from each other as they maintained their own standards pertaining to the women folk. The various tribes of Arunachal Pradesh followed the system of patriarchy. The women are less privileged than men in certain areas of social and political life but they are suppressed by men in all fields. This novel narrates poignant tale of some strong women characters who suffered in the hands of patriarchal authority and colonial power. This revealed the dark reality of the tribal women whose sufferings and voices were silenced "If she wants survival, let her thoughts be ideal" (46). Gimur was an excellent worker and suffered from exclusion in the society even after her marriage with Kajinsha because she lacked one of the most important requirements in the marriage. The only way to seal her marital status with him is to bear his child again, which is a healthy boy. Dai also presents strong women characters like, Moi, Auli, Nenum, Pinyar and others in her select fictions to depict the strength and endurance of women in different situations of life.

The title of the novel *The Black Hill* refers to the black hill, the abode of Kajinsha and Gimur, which lies close to border of the Zayul valley of Tibet. Their new house, a thatched bamboo longhouse was surrounded by wooden slopes of trees and a small stream. It was scenic, peaceful and secluded from other huts. This territory was unexplored by the *migluns*. The black hill connotes seclusion, isolation and protection but it is also ominous, hideous and mysterious. Many of the important and horrific events in the novel played out in this place. Land ownership and resolving land conflicts are two toughest challenges a chief has to oversee.

Indigenous rhythms plays a vital role in Mamang Dai's works. Similarly she points out, the ecological predicament of place that refers to the need for traditions and rituals which require certain trees, place, and other materials are needed to be preserved. This emphasizes that if certain trees, rivers, animals and places that are sacred to the people are lost, it will not threaten the ecology but the rites and rituals that were derived from them will be loss. The native people treated nature with mystery and respect; the *migluns* see it only in terms of prospect. The characters in this novel serve as the heart of native or tribal resistance against the *migluns* or the Britishers lies in the desire to live an autonomous life without outside interference. In short, the Abor and Mishmi people were sovereign people who strongly opposed the presence of *migluns* in their land. This novel serves as an example of indigenous or native writing for employing local language, expressions, beliefs, taboos and omens. It has included narrative of superstitious beliefs, evil spirits, rituals, and dreams of the characters. It is a postcolonial text which focuses on the tribal people and their culture. It counteracts with the colonisers model of writing and it opted for an indigenous form of writing.

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