

A Postcolonial Study of Mamang Dai's *The Black Hill*

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Abstract

Mamang Dai is an eminent North-East Indian woman writer in English who extensively explored the culture and history of Arunachal Pradesh and its ethnic groups. Her latest novel *The Black Hill* (2014) has got a great success for narrating neglected history of tribals and their resistance against the British's colonialism. Throughout the novel, Mamang Dai reveals that tribes are engaged in constant inter-tribe feuds over territories but they are protective and possessive when they realise that colonisers are slowly approaching to invade their land and everything. Mamang Dai weaves a beautiful love story of Kajinsha and Gimur and the expenditure of missionary French Priest Father Krick to present colonial circumstances in Arunachal Pradesh.

Key words: Postcolonialism, tribals, cultural hegemony, border consciousness, resistance.

Mamang Dai is a powerful literary voice from the emerging North-East Indian Literature. She is a celebrated Indian poet, novelist and journalist born in Itanagar, Arunachal Pradesh. She has written non-fictional works like *Arunachal Pradesh: the Hidden Land* (2003), *Mountain Harvest: The Food of Arunachal Pradesh* (2004) and *The Sky Queen and Once Upon a Moontime* (2003). Her fame rests on novels like *The Legend of Pensam* (2006), *Stupid Cupid* (2006), *The Black Hill* (2014) and *Escaping the Land* (2021). She is also famous for her poems such as *River Poems* (2004), *Balm of Time* (2008), *Hambreelmai's Loom* (2014) and *Midsummer Survival Lyrics* (2014). Her literary career is rewarded by Padma Shri (2011) and Sahitya Akademi Award (2017) for the novel *The Black Hill*.

The Black Hill is a fictional novel set in mid 19th century colonised India. It is a gripping work of fiction around a recorded historical event of the mysterious disappearance of a French priest, Father Nicolas Krick in Arunachal Pradesh in 1850s. The story revolves around three characters- Kajinsha, Gimur and Father Nicholas Krick. The story begins with Gimur, the Abor tribe of Arunachal Pradesh, who falls in love and elopes with a Mishmee chief Kajinsha who visits the Mebo village to solve the problems of border trespassing by the Migluns (British). The French priest Father Krick was assigned a mission to go and set up a church in Tibet. Through the love story of Kajinsha and Gimur, Dai narrates the confrontation between tribes and their unity to resist British dominance in Assam and Brahmaputra valley by killing Father Krick and Augustine Bourry.

The present paper aims at a postcolonial study of the novel *The Black Hill*. The term 'Postcolonial' works as an umbrella term for different theories developed by a variety of philosophers, theorists and anthropologists to analyse postcolonial condition during and after colonial period. It defines all the social, historical, political, racial, economical, cultural and textual complications resulted due to East-West encounter. It is the study of the oppressive consequences on both the invaders and the

colony. It also refers to the Third World's national, cultural, textual attempt to resist and subvert colonial oppression that tries to naturalise hegemony. As Homi Bhabha says:

Postcolonial perspective emerges from the colonial testimony of Third world countries and the discourses of 'minorities' within the geopolitical divisions of East and West, North and South. They intervene in those ideological discourses of modernity that attempt to give a hegemonic 'normality' to the uneven development and the differential, often, disadvantaged, histories of nations, races, communities, peoples. (Bhabha 171)

The postcolonial study of Mamang Dai's *The Black Hill* will focus upon problems of unrecorded history, colonisation and resistance, border consciousness, cultural hegemony, cultural diversity and assimilation, cross-cultural communication, language barrier, identity crisis, ambivalence and textualisation that are very relevant in postcolonial study.

Literature has been a medium of self expression about the serious contemplation about human life in totality. The emerging literatures from the Northeast of India are paving way for the varied ethnic groups to re-establish their unrecorded history, identity, dynamic cultures and ethnic identity. Mamang Dai's literary writings are one such from the Northeast frontier of India presenting her own experience about the history, ethnic culture and native people's resistance against British colonialism. In her preface to *Arunachal Pradesh: The Hidden Land*, Dai emphasizes the necessity to go back over the ignored colonial histories of the ethnic society in India. She states that the history of our origin and our people is based purely on the few recorded documents left by the early explorers. This forms the basis for Dai's postcolonial attitude to reinterpret and preserve the recorded history in the voice of the native sufferers. *The Black Hill* is narration of untold history of tribal's cultural unity to resist British religion, culture and colonialism. Dai writes about this novel, "There is another story from an unwritten past hidden beyond the mountain wall. I journey for many days to find it, and one day I come upon a black hill" (Dai ix). It is also a fictional representation of the hidden past about Mishmi Chief Kajinsha who is prosecuted being falsely blamed for assassinating a French Father Krick and Augustine Bourry while in reality Father Krick was murdered by Lamet. Dai's knowledge on the available history of the Adi and Mishmi communities triggers her to present the pre-independent scenario of the Tribes of Northeast India in which Adi and Mishmi struggle with the foreigners and resist their encroachment to defend their territories.

Colonisation is one of the key issues of the postcolonial study. It affects the life of both the colonisers and the colonised. Dai has described various incidents that are proofs of British encroachment. She narrated one event of British defeat in 1839 when Khampti clans of Suddya in Assam rose up against the British colonisation. Their chief, Suddya Khawa Gohain, had been removed from his position by the British authorities. When he sent out a call for help, in the leadership of Kajinsha's father, 500-armed Khampti warriors attacked the British Political Agent, Colonel Adam White, and butchered forces of eighty men. In the fighting Kajinsha's father had been wounded. Both the Adis and the Mishmi tribes suspected that the British are encroaching in their region to exploit both the natural resources and the tribal community. They collectively rebel against the British in the Northeast parts of India because "no one wants the British to come into the hills. The elders have

decided, and we, all the tribes, we are together in this. If the migluns wants to use force, just let them try!" (Dai 24). They attack the British camps and plan many hurdles in Krick's journey to Tibet. He convinces the tribal people that he is a man of religion but he is always seen with distrust. Chief Zumsha says, "He is not a soldier. But we have to be alert. He is still a white foreigner- a kla kamphlung! Who knows about these people? To us they are all strangers". (Dai, 78) Kajinsha also wants to defend his territory against any foreign entry but the tribal people of other clan entrap him in the murder of Father Krick. He is not responsible for the death of the French priest Krick yet he is executed due to colonisers' motive to impede the Tribes' resistance against their encroachment in country. This is the reason that the mission to arrest Kanjinsha is declared as exhibition of the British power as Dai says, "It was a great show of British might and authority" (Dai 264).

Border consciousness is a very important issue in postcolonial study. From the early of our civilisation, we have learnt how any community, state or nation has been conscious about the safety of their border against invasion. In *The Black Hill*, border consciousness plays double role-- the border within and outside of Arunachal Pradesh. Mamang Dai reveals the possessive and protective attitude of the tribes to their territory. The Adis and the Mishmi tribes inhabiting in the hills of Arunachal Pradesh were very much hostile towards the outsiders. The tribes living in one valley viewed their neighbours with suspicion. Claims over land, rivers and streams to hunt and fish, regularly result into horrible inter-tribal feuds. The border consciousness becomes fruitful when it unites them to prevent the British entry in the Northeast parts of India. They struggled to resist the slowly approaching colonisers who wanted invade their land and destruct their culture and peace. They resist outsiders because they have a strong connection and obsession to their land. Each person of every tribe believes that they are spiritually relation to their land because "Land is place of ownership and rest" (Dai 112).

Dai has sharply criticised the cultural hegemony of the British in this novel. Cultural hegemony aims at the progress of religion and missionary school for better hegemonic rule in the colonies. It is dominance of one social group on another. It is a philosophical and sociological concept that culturally diverse society can be ruled and dominated by one of its social classes. The Occident or Superior Western countries assume themselves superior of Orients and wanted to teach them their way of life. Homi Bhabha has pointed out that the object of western cultural hegemony is "to construe the colonised as a population of degenerate types on the basis of racial origin, in order to justify conquest and to establish systems of administration and instruction" (Bhabha 70). We find in the novel that Nicolas Michel Krick is an ambitious religious leader. He is determined to reach Tibet to spread his religion and culture because he is taught that their culture is the best culture in the world and it should be adopted by all. Guinea-Bissau liberation leader Amilcar Cabral states that resistance to colonialism is possible if the indigenous culture remains intact. He writes, "The people are only able to create and develop the liberation movement because they kept their culture alive... and because they continue to resist culturally even when their politico-military resistance is destroyed" (Cabral 60). We study that Father Krick faces a lot of resistance during his journey. He tries to convince Kajinsha that he is just a priest who wants to visit Tibet to preach Christianity and start a missionary but Kajinsha never trusted him. Kajinsha and his people believed that the Miglun (British) speak innocently to steal and ruin their rich history, culture, myth and custom. They have horrible memory of past therefore we find that father Krick undergoes all

kinds of troubles. He wanders through unknown mountains, lives amongst hostile people and is murdered just as result of resistance by the tribal community.

Dai is more concentrated to present the cultural diversity and cultural assimilation in North-East India. Mamang Dai introduces two tribes- Abor (Adi) and Mishmee who live in different parts of the Upper Assam-the area below Tibet. She belongs to Adi community so she perfectly gives the detailed origin and history of the Adi Tribes. The Adi tribes once belonged to a major Tribal group Tani who later migrated from the north of the Himalayas of Tibetan region and settled in different parts along the River valleys of Siang in Arunachal Pradesh. They are referred as the “Abor” but they prefer to be called as ‘Adi’ instead of ‘Abor’ due to its derogatory significance. Mamang Dai uses the term Adi in place of Abor in her author’s note in the novel. The novel gives vivid description of the Abors in Mebo. It is a closely knit privileged race full of intrepid warriors who refrain themselves from the strangers. She says that the origin of the Mishmi tribes is unclear. Gimur and Kajinsha represent the Adi and Mishmi Tribes respectively. They have to run away to marry because “Inter-tribe relationships were a betrayal to the community” (Dai 45). Their cultural assimilation is also a resistance against cultural diversity in Arunachal Pradesh.

Cross-cultural communication is a field of postcolonial study that looks at how people from different cultural backgrounds communicate, create and share experiences using a variety of means. Brian J. Hurn and Barry Tomalin opine, “Cross- cultural communication is about the way people from different cultures communicate when they deal with each other either at a distance or face to face. Communication can involve spoken and written language, body language and the language of etiquette and protocol” (Hurn 2). Mamang Dai’s *The Black Hill* retells the unobserved cross cultural communication in the history of the Tribes of Northeast India. The novel presents inter tribal conflict and communication. At first, Kajinsha’s father arranges his marriage to Auli from a Tibetan tribe to develop a good cultural relationship with the tribe. Gimur elopement with Kajinsha breaks all socio-cultural taboos of her tribe. Gimur and Kajinsha marry each other despite their different tribal ethnicity to promote love and cross cultural communication between diverse tribes. They even do not know each other’s language. Dai writes about Gimur, “She did not speak his language but he had some knowledge of hers, and it was enough” (Dai 35). Nicolas Michel Krick is an ambitious man who has determined to reach Tibet to spread his religion and culture. He is desperate to undertake the most dangerous route through the Mishmee Hills to fulfill the task of culture and religion extension.

Language barrier and difficulty in communication between the East and the West is the most important issue of postcolonial study. Mamang Dai has minutely displayed that language barrier also problematic during colonial encounter. The tribals of Arunachal Pradesh knew nothing of English and the missionaries also realised difficulty in spreading their culture. They find, “The people they met, their helpers and houseboys, belonged to different ethnic and linguistic group and spoke different dialects and language that the missionaries had never heard of before. They would have to engage language teachers and learn a new tongue all over again—at least Assamese” (Dai 42).

Within the context of postcolonial study, identity acquires a crucial meaning. Identity is constructed by a person’s race, religion, class, caste, gender and nationality to a great extent. Homi

Bhabha argues that identities are more disparaging than beneficial because the manifestation of the stereotypes leads to colonial subjugation of both the coloniser and the colonised. Dai explores that it is not only that the Orientals are identified as savage and murderers but the British have also been identified as a brutal and violent. The bloody history of east-west encounter has forced each side to be fearful of each other. She writes about the tribes, "History had shown them that no matter how friendly they were, in the end the migluns brought only death and destruction" (Dai 192). Kajinsha has witnessed his father's death so he also fosters the feeling of enmity against the white soldier and warns outsider's entry into his region. Kajinsha is not responsible for the death of the French priest Krick yet he is lastly identified as murderer in the textual history.

Ambivalence is the effect of colonisation which puts both the coloniser and the colonised in the dilemma of attraction and revulsion for each other. Mamang Dai has provided some hints of ambivalence in the attraction of Gimur and the priest Krick for each other. Gimur used to watch him slyly. Krick used to visualize angel and Roman Goddess Bellona in her as well as her "aloof manner and posture intrigued him" (Dai 181). Dai also writes about Gimur's psychological state, "The Priest had gone but his visit had created something. Surely someone had been touched, some would remember his face, someone would feel drawn to his words or his clothes or anything at all, and it would mean beginning of change in someone's heart" (Dai 192). Krick died in the lap of Gimur but he was happy that she had arrived at the time of his death.

Discourse is knowledge and knowledge is power. Edward Said's *Orientalism* has contributed a lot in understanding how Orientals are textualised as inferior, savage, uncivilised, stupid, murderer and mysterious in travel books of Europeans. Said points out that since history is made by people, it is possible "for many objects or places or times to be assigned roles and given meanings that acquire objective validity only after the assignments are made" (Said 54). Mamang Dai feels sorrow that many of the native's true stories are misinterpreted in the western texts. She takes it as her duty to rewrite stories of silent past and resist textualisation. She shares her reason of telling the story, "Every dawn I think all the stories of the world are connected. At night another voice tells me- no, there are more stories yet that are silent and separate. There are many lost stories in the world and versions that were misplaced yesterday or a hundred years ago". (Dai ix) It seems to her that the story of the priest is also a manipulated version of reality According to the record, a Mishmi chief was charged guilty of the priest's death. This account tries to exhibit the atrocious nature of the tribes. But they are not as the textual records describes. Kajinsha tries to break the British mirror to them, "Tell them about us... Tell them we were good. Tell them we also had some things to say. But we cannot read and write. So we tell stories" (Dai 288). Kajinsha's relatives killed Lamet's family in the revenge for betraying Kajinsha to the British but no one of them knew what the history book would say.

Thus, we can conclude that Mamang Dai's *The Black Hill* exposes the trauma and suffering of Northeast tribal community that were still neglected or misrepresented in history and literature to naturalise colonisation. The novel fabricates a new version of tribal history with a native spirit. The novelist is successful in conjuring up the vanished past and the fast vanishing cultural ethos of the Northeast tribes. Kailash C. Baral rightly says, "In the absence of authentic histories of most

communities in Northeast, the creative writers have taken it upon themselves to be cultural historians. Their works provide us the resource for writing alternative histories” (Baral 8).

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