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## **Mamang Dai: The Voice of the Unheard**

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### **Abstract:**

India is a rich and diverse land where people from different regions, religions, communities, cultures, and traditions live together peacefully and harmoniously. However, a segment of the population that feels outcasted and neglected, that is the Northeast. People of the Northeast are the residents of the mountains and they find themselves neglected by the people of the rest of India. The problem does not only end here. It stretches further by the continuous governmental intervention into the life of the masses which makes them feel clutched as they lack basic freedom. Normalcy is lacking due to the various laws and restrictions. All these things together form a situation of fear, grief, pain, and most uncertainty of life. Writers from the Northeast have tried to address these issues and bring them out through their writings. One of these writers is Mamang Dai. Her poems have a strong connection with nature, but are not only about nature. They seem simple but a deep reading highlights the hidden nuances that speak volumes about the disrupted and disturbed state of people in the Northeast. In this paper, I have tried to highlight the details and the various hidden nuances that deserve to be studied intensely in Dai's poems. This paper looks at Dai's poems from different angles and dimensions without limiting them to any perspective or area of thought.

**Keywords:** Northeast, India, residents, fear, pain, hope.

### **Introduction**

India is a country with a rich culture and heritage. People from different communities, religions, castes, etc, live here in a state of harmony creating a sense togetherness. But the Northeastern

part of India feels left out. As it is often seen as the “other”. It craves to be recognized as part of India like the other states. The Northeast is seen from a different perspective compared to the rest of India. Especially when it comes to their appearance, a glimpse of which we find in Jahnvi Barua’s novel *Rebirth* where she highlights how the central character Kaberi who is a resident of the Northeast but settled in Bengaluru on meeting a girl Radhika could predict her commenting merely by her expressions that “But you don’t look Assamese, you know, chinky eyes and all that” (Barua 129). The Northeast is forced to go through several government restrictions making the place challenging to survive. They find these events deeply hurtful and are forced to endure mental and emotional disturbances, which unsettle them and make them feel alienated and neglected.

This otherness and negligence that the Northeast has to go through is unacceptable and disheartening for the residents. Several poets hailing from the Northeast who have had first-hand experience of these difficult circumstances share their experiences that make evident the mental disturbances and trauma they have to go through. The works elaborate on how they feel devastated internally as well as externally. One such poet is Mamang Dai. Northeast has two sides on one hand there is nature and its beauty and on the other hand, there is enormous turmoil that one has to go through being a resident of the place. Sanjoy Hazarika points at this dichotomy in his work *Writing on the Wall* that, “The North-east is a magnificent and tragic tapestry of people, events and nature” (Hazarika 9). The same is reflected in Dai’s poems as she brings both these sides. Her poems voice the collective pain of the Northeast that is craving to be recognized as a part of India along with the images of beautiful nature lying parallelly by the side. In this paper, we will be looking at three of Mamang Dai’s poems namely “Tapu”, “Small Towns and the River” and “An Obscure Place” to understand the hidden nuances such as pain, grief, and hope.

### **The disturbances**

The residents of the Northeast have to endure a lot, as they are constantly at risk of facing difficulties. The fear and discomfort regarding this are reflected in Dai’s voice as seen in the poem “Tapu”, she writes how they do not have a history of peace and that their days have always

been marked with great dangers. Her concern regarding this is reflected in the lines where she writes in “Tapu”:

Mark the sword.

Mark the sound.

What are the words

we will tell our sons and daughters? (“Tapu” 19)

In these lines, Dai reveals how their narratives and tales are full of “sword” and “sound”, pointing at the constant violence that the people of Northeast are exposed to. To their misfortune, these are the only stories to pass on to their future generations. As Temsula Ao in *These Hills Called Home* writes regarding the trauma in the lives of the people of the Northeast.

For the victims the trauma goes beyond the realm of just the physical maiming and loss of life—their very humanity is assaulted and violated, and the onslaught leaves the survivors scarred both in mind and soul. (Ao x)

Dai does not limit these feelings of grief to human beings but also transfers them to the objects of nature as she does in her poem “Small Towns and the River”. As Dai writes:

The river has a soul.

In the summer it cuts through the land

like a torrent of grief. Sometimes

sometimes, I think it holds its breath

seeking the land of fish and stars. (“Small Towns” 22)

In these lines, Dai not only draws our attention towards the liveliness of the river but also forces us to see the grief that the river goes through. Dai personifies the river to convey its pain and writes about how even the river flowing through the Northeast longs to see the land free from all

its difficulties. River also hopes the Northeast will emerge as a peaceful and happy place. Holding of “breath” refers to the hope that one day all will be fine.

### **The tracelessness**

Mamang Dai in her poems highlights how the people of the Northeast do not have a history of their own. They are not able to recognize themselves. When Dai says this, she does not imply that their communities or tribes lack proper culture or traditions that reflect their roots. By highlighting tracelessness or inability to recognize their identity, she emphasizes how the Northeast feels excluded when it comes to the history of India. Concern and pain regarding this is reflected in the lines of her poem “An Obscure Place” as she writes:

The history of our race  
begins with the place of stories.  
We do not know if the language we speak  
belongs to a written past.  
Nothing is certain. (“An Obscure Place” 85)

In these lines, we also find the uncertainty which has almost become an inseparable part of the lives of the people of the Northeast. Dai here clarifies that the race to which they belong has a past and “stories”, but she is not sure regarding the fact that the “language” they speak has a “written past” referring to the lack of recognition of the Northeast and its languages across India. Uncertainty of the lives of residents and the history of the Northeast is reflected in this line.

### **The nature**

The people of the Northeast find no one to share the pain and grief that they go through except nature. Nature plays a significant role in the lives of the residents of the Northeast reflected in the writings set or originating from this place, the protagonist in Barua’s *Rebirth* goes through moments of nostalgia and says, “On that hilltop, the air scented by the voluptuous blossoms of temple trees, I was supremely alone” (Barua 109). It can be understood how the people of this place could not separate themselves from nature. It is only nature that adds to the sense of solace

and calmness that is majorly missing in their lives being a companion to them. The poems of Dai have a strong role and representation of nature within them. In “Small Towns and the River” Dai writes in the very beginning lines how,

Small towns always remind me of death.  
My hometown lies calmly amidst the trees,  
It is always the same, in the summer or winter  
with the dust flying,  
or the wind howling down the gorge (“Small Towns” 22)

These lines highlight how death surrounds them but nature successfully adds to the calmness. Still, nature, in the form of “dust” and “howling winds,” continues to hint at the disturbances amidst the calm. This way, nature becomes a true companion, which not only spreads solace but also shares the grief. Even the poem “Tapu” gives special importance to nature by highlighting it as the primary source of survival for the people of the Northeast. As she writes:

In this diagram  
looking through the sun’s face,  
peeping through the moon,  
the meaning of life is contained  
in fulfilling obligation. (“Tapu” 19)

Dai writes how nature adds to the meaning of their lives as she refers to the “diagram” probably the map of the Northeast where they have two things that form their life. Firstly nature in the form of “sun” and “moon” and secondly the “obligations” which they are bound to follow. In her poem “An Obscure Place” Dai writes “We climbed every slope. We slept by the river” (“An Obscure Place” 86). These lines highlight how nature is an almost inseparable part of their lives. Nature is embedded into their hearts and souls and they seem to know every nook and corner of

the mountains they reside on. The lines speak volumes about the in-depth understanding of the natural aspects that the residents of the Northeast have about their homeland.

### **The traditions and rituals**

Traditions and cultures play a significant role in holding the people in communities together. Especially in places like India, rituals play a significant role in shaping the identity of the nation and its people. However, since the Northeast is not seen or recognized as a part of India. The culture and rituals become even more important as the communities in the Northeast find their identity through these very customs and traditions. In “Small Towns and the River” she writes how,

Just the other day someone died.

In the dreadful silence we wept

looking at the sad wreath of tuber rose.

Life and death, life and death,

Only the rituals are permanent. (“Small Towns” 22)

Dai here writes how the people of Northeast weep in a “dreadful silence”. In the time of loss, they have nothing to rely upon. Nature too seems to be in a state of mourning and is no longer able to provide them with the strength and support as indicated in the line “the sad wreath of tuber rose” the saddening of the tuber rose can be compared with the saddening of the nature. In such situations, the rituals and traditions step forth and play the part of a significant support system by binding people together and adding a sense of collectiveness.

### **The never-ending courage and hope**

Even though the Northeast is a place full of uncertainty, fear, terror, and pain and that they are inescapable for the residents of this place. Dai does not want to leave the place and settle in some other part of the country. Rather, she holds onto hopes of betterment in this place. She hopes that one day, things will return to normal, and the people residing in the Northeast will be able to lead

pain-free, comforting, and happy lives. Dai's hope is reflected in the lines of the poem "Small Towns and the River" as she writes:

In the cool bamboo,  
restored in the sunlight  
life matters, like this.  
In small towns by the river  
We all want to walk with the gods. ("Small Towns" 23)

In these lines, the "cool bamboo" indicates the frozenness and the numbness of the Northeast. However, Dai has a hope that as the "sunlight" is restored every day, the warmth too will soon melt the frozenness and that they will soon be able "to walk with the gods". The "gods" refer to the people residing throughout India perceiving themselves as the authority demeaning and neglecting the people of the Northeast. Dai even wants her future generations to prosper amidst the fear and terror surrounding them. She writes vividly about it in her poem "Tapu":

That dying is not so hard if the image survives.  
When the wind is young, sow celebration,  
seize the branch of lightning  
Dress the thorn wood stem for conception.  
Across the barren earth  
the fence stretches the boundaries  
of the natural world  
Children are for the blessed,  
only in dreams we hear the sighs of the unborn.



In the eternal landscape of hope and longing  
alchemy happens with faith.  
Driving the spirit of fear into the dust  
like a mirage  
the mountains range themselves  
blue flashing, in the circle of the sun. (“Tapu” 19-20)

In these lines Dai writes about how she would not feel sad if she has to die with the image surviving i.e. she would have no pain and grief dying if the Northeast has its residents who continue to live. She even urges the people to take their generations forward. She knows that the place is full of thorns but still, she feels that the place shouldn't be left barren. She believes that the “blue” or the frozenness of the place will soon melt away with the “sun” or the progression that she hopes to see. The poem too comes forth with a profound message in general. The poem teaches us that we should never give up. We should hope for the change. The sense of belief should never leave us even in the harshest and toughest of times.

### **The questions and arguments in the poems**

Dai's poems along with carrying a sense of hope for the future also come forth with certain questions and arguments which force us to think. The poem “Tapu” begins with the lines:

Here we have marked the land  
with upright branches and stones,  
And consecrated territory  
with song, and the leap of the warrior  
returning triumphant. (“Tapu” 19)

Here the poet writes how the land for them is marked with the “branches and stones” indicating the nature and mountains. Their songs are that of the warriors “returning triumphant”. Thus,

despite staying in the problematic mountainous regions and having songs of valor imbibed in their culture, they are outcastes. The poet here forces us to think about the reason for doing so. In the poem “Small Towns and the River” the poet comes up with the revolt indicated in the following lines as the poet writes:

The dead are placed pointing west.

When the soul rises

It will walk into the golden east,

Into the house of the sun. (“Small Towns” 23)

In these lines, the poet writes that the “dead are placed pointing west” indicating the fact that the people of Northeast are born and die in darkness without getting proper recognition as a citizen of the country. But she says their souls walk towards “the golden east” indicating that the boundations and restrictions no longer continue when the soul is free. This freeness is like walking towards the “east” or the light. Unfortunately, only comes after death. The Northeast is the region where the sun is seen first in all of India every day. Somewhere Dai comes up with an argument that nature does not discriminate against the people of the Northeast on any basis. The same is expected from human beings too. These questions and arguments force us to focus on, think, and understand what Dai wants us to look at by drawing our attention to the various nuances she crafts in her poems.

### **The Northeast as the “orient” of India**

The idea of "Orient" is never that of an inferior one inherently, but is created. As Edward Said in his book *Orientalism* writes “The Orient was almost a European invention, and been since antiquity a place of romance, exotic beings, haunting memories and landscapes, remarkable experiences” (Said 1). Said clarifies that the idea of the East as an inferior is a constructed one. In the same way, it is as if the entire India in different ways puts in effort to frame the Northeast as the other. As the West views the “Orient” as the inferior in the same way India views the Northeast as the inferior one. This shows how the Northeast emerged as the inferior “Orient” for India. This also shows the double marginalization of the Northeast in the Saidian terms.

The process of decolonizing has always been complicated for a country. India as a country still has not been able to decolonize itself. The state of decolonization for the Northeast is even more difficult this could be understood clearly by what Fanon writes in his book *The Wretched of the Earth* "decolonization is quite simply the replacing of a certain 'species' of men by another 'species' of men. Without any period of transition, there is a total, complete and absolute substitution" (Fanon 27). This is what exactly happened to the people of the Northeast.

## Conclusion

The literature is the reflection of society. This statement is applicable and aptly justifiable for the works written in the context of the Northeast. The poems by Mamang Dai voice the pain, grief, and trauma that the residents of the Northeast go through daily in their lives. She mainly uses nature as a tool to convey her concerns, but her intentions and the statements she makes are not limited to nature. Her poems voice the various circumstances of the Northeast that the entire India and especially the world needs to be conscious of. Her poems seem to be simple but they carry profound messages in the form of revelations and fears. The poems of Dai touch on varied areas like the disturbances, the tracelessness, the traditions, and rituals. She also adds several questions forcing the readers to think. The only wish she seems to have when she writes the poem is change. Her poems do not have any tone of revenge for whatever she and the entire population of the Northeast is facing but the only thing she desires is change. The lamp of hope continues to light up in her heart and she firmly sticks to the belief that the residents of the Northeast will witness the change one day.

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