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NPTEL ONLINE CERTIFICATION COURSE

Indian Poetry in English

Lecture 35: Mamang Dai

BINOD MISHRA

DEPARTMENT OF HUMANITIES AND SOCIAL SCIENCES



Ethnographic Voices

- ✓ Writings of particular region, culture or linguistic tradition
- ✓ Concern for their local culture, local identity, and language Images and themes drawn from indigenous culture
- ✓ Memory, past, nostalgia, distinctive identity, regional problems, cultural history
- ✓ Decaying of their local identity because of globalization, colonization or neo-colonialism
- ✓ Cultural expression is the key element.

Northeast Literary Tradition



- Dynamic culture
- Tribal ethos
- Portrayal of ecology
- Documenting the tribal history
- Reclaiming the forgotten past

- "Tribal History is not seen as a continuity in Indian historiography. (I use the word tribal, not indigenous people or aborigine, because it is appropriate to the Indian context). Yet it is still continuing, the tribals are still being evicted from their land." --Mahasweta Devi

Contd…..

- Victimization of Northeast people
- Large scale violence and unrest
- Conflict between the indigenous and the state

Robin. S. Ngangom and Kynpham S. Nongkynrih argued: “Much of the uniqueness of North-East poetry is the consequence of contemporary events, violence especially. The writer from the Northeast differs from his counterpart in the mainland in a significant way living with the menace of the gun he cannot merely indulge in verbal wizardry and woolly aesthetics but must perforce master the art of witness.”

Contd…

- Question of history and local identity
- In Indian history, they have not been given enough space and that's why they tend to re-write their past.
- Kailash. C. Baral 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."
- Tribal myths
- Local folklore

Mamang Dai

- Born in 1957, Pasighat, in an Adi Community of East Siang district of Arunachal Pradesh
- Poet, novelist, journalist, historian, and former civil servant
- Worked with the World Wildlife Fund in Itanagar for the Eastern Himalaya Biodiversity Hotspots Program
- Covered programs and interviews for All India Radio
- Worked as journalist for *The Hindustan Times*, *The Telegraphs*, and *The Sentinel*.
- Honoured with Padmashri in 2011.
- Sahitya Akademy Award in 2017.



Contd…..

- Dai belongs to the Adi community of Arunachal Pradesh whose faith is “woven around forest ecology and co-existence with the natural world”

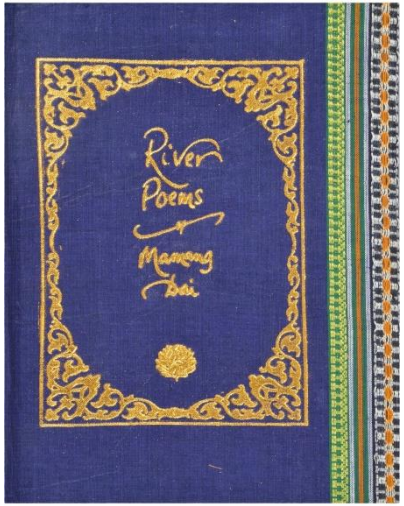
- Inspired by the geography and landscape of Arunachal Pradesh.

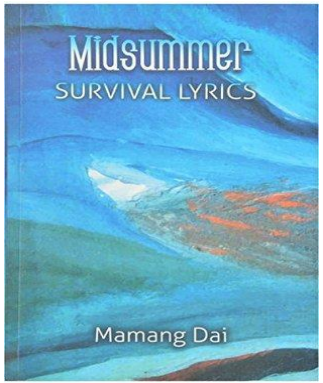
“I live in a small town surrounded by hills. If I travel to other parts of the state it is the same - more mountains and forests, river crossings and rough roads. So the physical presence of the land is very tangible”. (Mamang Dai)

Concern over her homeland

“On the one hand, in keeping with the national agenda, the state is forging ahead with goals for progress and development. On the other – the history of our people, our origins and routes of migration remain a matter of speculation, based purely on the few recorded documents left by the early explorers. There are also specialized niches in our tribal heritage that may be erased forever if change is not assessed and negotiated carefully.”

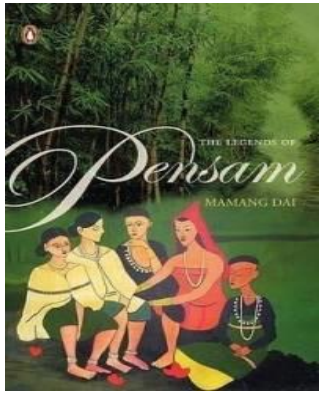
---Mamang Dai



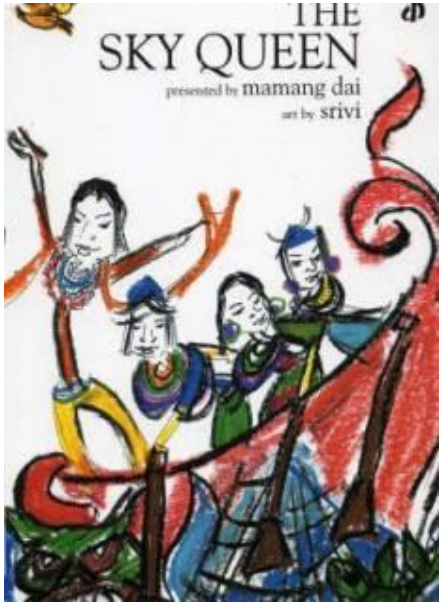


Her Literary Corpus

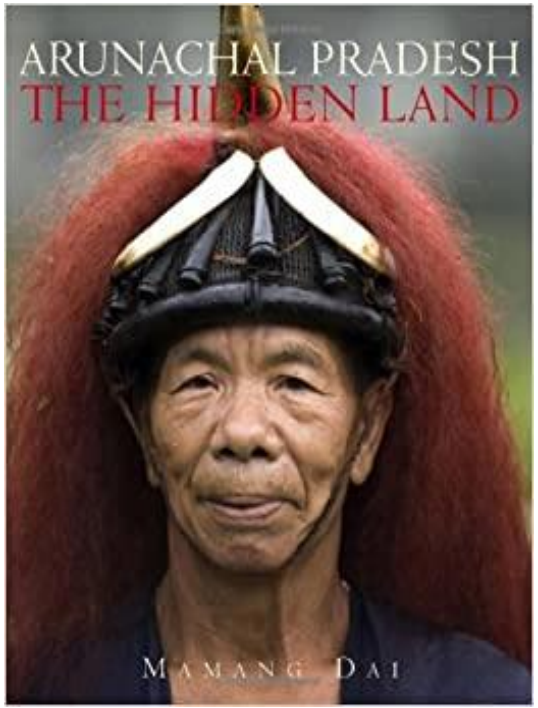
- **Poetry Collections**
  - *River Poems* (2004)
  - *The Balm of Time* (2008)
  - *Midsummer Survival Lyrics* (2012)
- **Fictional Writings**
  - *The Legends of Pensam* (2006)
  - *Stupid Cupid* (2009)
  - The Black Hill (2014)
  - The Sky Queen (2005)
  - Once Upon a Moon Time (2005)



Contd..



- **Non-fiction**
- *Arunachal Pradesh: The Hidden Land* (2003-04)
  - This is about the culture, tradition, legends, and lifestyle of Arunachal people.
- *Mountain Harvest: The Food of Arunachal* (2004)



Some Major Lines

...
Where else could we be born,
where else could we belong
if not of memory,
divining life and form out of silence?
Water and mist,
the twin gods, water and mist,
and the cloud woman always calling
from the sanctuary of the gorge.
("The Missing Link")

.....
If I sit very still
I think I can join the big mountains
In their speechless ardour

Where no sun is visible
the hills are washed with light.
The river sings
love floats
love floats
But I have no dreams.
("No Dreams")

....
For as long as remembrance
men stared at fire and water.
We dwell in the mountains and do not know
what the world hears about us.
foragers for a destiny,
all the days of our lives
we stare at the outline of the hills,
lifting our eyes to the invincible sky.
(Remembrance)

General Themes of Dai's Poems

- Delineation of common people of Northeast India
- Past and present of her homeland
- Ecology of Arunachal Pradesh
- Native sensibility and ethnic identity
- Reflects ecological-spiritualism through her poetry.
- Ancient myths and rich tribal culture

"I am influenced by the oral narratives. Knowing the stories gives me a sense of identity. It inspires my writing – after all it is a world of myth, memory, and imagination. Oral narratives are generally perceived as a simple recounting of tales for a young audience but I think their significance lies in the symbols embedded in the stories about the sanctity of life, about what makes us human. My response to myth/stories is akin to a quest." (Mamang Dai)

“An Obscure Place”

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.
There are mountains. Oh! There are mountains.
We climbed every slope. We slept by the river.
But do not speak of victory yet.
An obscure place haunts the hunter.
The prise slips away.
Yesterday the women hid their faces.
They forbade their children to speak.
Yesterday we gave shelter to men
who climbed over our hills



Contd…

for glory of a homeland, they said-

those who know what knowing is,

And now the sleeping houses, the men and the villages

have turned to stone.

If there is no death the news is silent.

If there is only silence, we should be disturbed

Listen, the tone of a prayer is hushed:

If a stranger passes this way

let him look up to the sky.

A smoke cloud chases the ants.

See! They have slain the wild cat

Contd…

and buried the hornbill in her maternal sleep.

The words of strangers have led us

into a mist deeper than the one we left behind

weeping, like the waving grassland

where the bones of our fathers are buried

surrounded by thoughts of beauty.

There are mountains. Oh! There are mountains.

We climbed every slope. We slept by the river.

But do not speak of victory yet!

Critical Analysis of the Poem

- About the oral history, culture and heritage of Arunachal Pradesh
- Language of the land may be uncertain, but the mountains are certain.
- Glorification of the mountains, praise of rivers and hills
- Celebration of nature
- Also shows the violence on a greater scale in the peaceful land.
- The poem ends with a doubt whether they should declare themselves victorious or not. This shows the kind of uncertainty pervasive in the land.

"Voice of the Mountain"

From where I sit on the high platform
I can see the ferry lights crossing
criss-crossing the big river.
I know the towns, the estuary mouth.
There, beyond the last bank
where the colour drains from heaven
I can outline the chapters of the world.
The other day a young man arrived from the village.
Because he could not speak
he brought a gift of fish
from the land of rivers.
It seems such acts are repeated:



We live in territories forever ancient and new,

and as we speak in changing languages.

I, also, leave my spear leaning by the tree

and try to make a sign.

I am an old man sipping the breese

that is forever young.

In my life I have lived many lives.

My voice is sea waves and mountain peaks,

In the transfer of symbols

I am the chance syllable that orders the world

Instructed with history and miracles.
I am the desert and the rain.
The wild bird that sits in the west.
The past that recreates itself
and particles of life that clutch and cling
For thousands of years –
I know, I know these things
as rocks know, burning in the sun's embrace,
about clouds, and sudden rain;
as I know a cloud is a cloud is a cloud,
A cloud is this uncertain pulse
that sits over my heart.
In the end the universe yields nothing
except a dream of permanence.
Peace is a falsity.

A moment of rest comes after long combat:
From the east the warrior returns
with the blood of peonies.
I am the child who died at the edge of the world,
the distance between end and hope.
The star diagram that fell from the sky,
The summer that makes men weep.
I am the woman lost in translation
who survives, with happiness to carry on.
I am the breath that opens the mouth of the canyon,
the sunlight on the tips of trees;
There, where the narrow gorge hastens the wind
I am the place where memory escapes
the myth of time,
I am the sleep in the mind of the mountain.

Analysis of the Poem

- Celebration of nature
- The mountain narrates its own existence and its omnipresence.
- It is both past and present.
- It knows history because of its old age and also can see the current cities, towns and modern world.
- It also shares the pain of the native people.
- Trying to settle within nature and natural objects, far from this modern mechanical world.
- Conflict between the ‘outsider’ and indigenous is visible.

Critical Comments of Dai's Poetry

- She writes with "rare passion and flow, fresh and full like the Siang river that meanders through her valley". (Pastani)
- "…….. full of the essence of tribal myths, mountains and an intense emotional involvement with her land (Pastani).
- "old world, neo romantic in essence"(Daruwalla)

Estimate of Mamang Dai as a Poet

- ✓ Dai represents the collective consciousness of Northeast people.
- ✓ She explores the ancient myths and culture and connects that to the modern world.
- ✓ She uses hills an drivers as metaphors and continues a search for homeland.
- ✓ Always in consonance with the natural beauty of her homeland
- ✓ One can find a representation of Donyi-polo culture in her muse.
- "She celebrates both the mystic as well as the commonplace that nature radiates; exploring myths behind the 'forces of nature', and thus leading the reader to ecological forests and magic drum beats……. She dreams of a peaceful vine and bamboo paradise where the cloud, the bat and the rain are in absolute harmony.." (Harpreet Vohra)

"Yes I believe in gods, in the forest
faith of good and evil
spirits of the river
and the dream world
of the dawn."
(*The Balm of Time*)

Thank You

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- Patsani, Bipin. “Old Voices and New: Literature from Arunachal”. *The Seven Sisters Post Literary Review*.3 June 2012.

- Vohra, Harpreet. “Symbolism of the Mountains: A Study of Selected Poems of Mamang Dai”, *The NEHU Journal,* Vol XI, No. 1, January 2013, pp. 45-54, ISSN.0972-9406