

ECOLOGICAL VISION IN THE POETRY OF MAMANG DAI

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Abstract: The present study aims to arrive at an ecological vision envisioned by Mamang Dai in her poetry. Dai deviates from regular, human-centric themes and makes non-human nature the prime concern of her poems in both her collections, *River Poems* and *Midsummer Survival Lyrics*. Her concern about the sorry state-of-affairs as regards the state of non-human lives, both 'flora' and 'fauna', leads her to ponder over value systems that aggravate the overall state of existence on Earth.

In the lines of Rachel Carson's active involvement in case of 'unscientific' and excessive use of pesticides as expressed in *Silent Spring*, Dai identifies selfish existence for the sake of 'development' as an unfortunate phenomenon which is harmful for everyone in the long run. She tries to uphold the value systems traditionally held in high esteem by the people of her ethnicity, the Adi people of Arunachal Pradesh in India. She assumes a position alongside Deep ecologists in her belief that human beings are not superior to non-human lives. She also shares the vision of abolishing social ideologies and hierarchies that perpetuate ecological destruction, and of making the best use of 'traditional' as well as 'scientific' knowledge to ensure ecological stability with Social ecologists like Murray Bookchin.

Key words: Ecological vision, Nature, Non-human lives, Development, Traditional values, Deep

Ecology, Social Ecology

AIMS AND OBJECTIVES

This paper attempts to delineate the ecological visions immanent in the poetry of Dai, especially with regard to finding appropriate behaviour patterns towards non-human entities.

METHODOLOGY

A close study of the poems in *Midsummer Survival Lyrics* and *River Poems* has been undertaken.

Secondary sources dealing with the literary theory of eco-criticism collected from various journals and books have been referred to.

Attempts have been made to compare the ecological principles promulgated by eco-critical theorists and the message Mamang Dai tries to incorporate in her poetry.

INTRODUCTION

The search for new ecological visions is based on seeking corrections to contemporary attitudes towards non-human nature in literature. It is also constitutive of facilitating inquiries into ideologies in practice in society that directly or indirectly induce desecration of nature. “Ecocriticism’s response to our ongoing environmental catastrophe has been the pursuit of two goals: a canon of works modeling a proper attitude toward nature, and an interrogation of the ideologies that support environmental destruction”(Beyers, 195). Mamang Dai’s poetry is thus infused with ecological consciousness that through her poetry, she expresses her disapproval of ideologies like ‘development’ and hierarchy as regards relationship between species, and suggests innovative and egalitarian approaches towards perceiving non-human lives.

1.1 Themes

The range of Dai’s concerns, both in *Midsummer Survival Lyrics*(2014) and in *River Poems*(2013), extend from harmful effects of deforestation, effects of climate change on animals like the rhinoceros, human encroachment on ‘forest’ lands, the similarities between the sufferings of marginalized people like women and slaves, the human-induced dangers birds and animals have to endure, and the immeasurability of life within rivers and clouds, to human relationship with non-human beings as suggested by ‘tribal’ oral lore, and deification of nature. Dai has also dedicated an entire section in *Midsummer Survival Lyrics* to non-human entities on Earth to suggest that non-human lives are as precious as human lives. It is titled “Other lives”.

2.1 Traditional Background to Dai’s Beliefs

Mamang Dai’s poetry contains references about her homeland and her people. It is reflective of a group of people that have, for generations, not been bothered about hierarchy: neither amongst human beings, nor in their interaction with non-human entities. “Tribals of various regions of India know very well that there is only one path to survival and that path is the ecological one, of harmony between man and nature. They believe that all nature is sacrosanct, that the earth itself as a living organism is capable of experiencing pain and pleasure”(Chandra and Das, 32). Moving away from traditional beliefs such as the in-spiritedness of natural ‘landmarks’ like mountains, trees and rivers is likely to induce new ecological crises. Dai seeks to re-define the modern hierarchical relationship between human beings and ‘other’ creatures. This non-human other includes animals, plants, the elements, the wind, and the earth, and everything not made by human beings.

Dai has constantly reminded, through her poetry, that the kinship of human beings extends to other species as well. “Many tribal communities in Arunachal believe in the myth of the Man and Tiger brotherhood. Killing a tiger is deemed killing a man” (ibid, 68). Even Dai has re-iterated this belief in her poems “Man and brother” in *Midsummer Survival Lyrics*. Not just the tiger, but human beings are believed to be kith and kin with the rain, the clouds and the bats as well. To quote a few lines from Dai’s poem “Birthplace”:

We are the children of the rain
of the cloud woman,
brother to the stone and bat
in our cradle of bamboo and vine
in our long houses we slept,
and when morning came
we were refreshed. (2013, 1-7)

As long as human beings understood that they were kith and kin with all non-human creatures around them, there was less anxiety. People were refreshed every morning. They did not have many encumbrances.

3.1 Scientific basis of Interdependence

Interdependence between human beings and non-human beings is not simply a matter whose effects one will feel in the long run. It is as immediate as can be. For the mountain that held the poet persona of “Egret River” who has now left her homeland, her being back in the mountains completes the missing part of the mountain ecology:

Now I know
The forest is my home,
the mist my breath.
Sun and snow land
call me north again.(2013, 21-25)

The forest is the home of human beings. The house of the human being cannot on its own be a home since a house cannot stand on vacuum. That the mist is the persona’s breath is true both literally and metaphorically. One inhales and exhales into the air and the mist. Similarly, the Sun and snow have stories they have experiences with the persona.

Despite the paradox of necessity of interdependence staring at the face of human beings, human beings fail to realize that their desire to dominate non-human Nature is not based on sound reasoning. According to Rachel Carson as expressed in *Silent Spring*, large-scale threats to the ecology are human-made. Pesticides, insecticides and

chemicals targeted at specific creatures like moth or mosquitoes threaten ‘small’ and ‘large’ animals too. They also poison the soil and the waters, endangering many more species of creatures. It is important to keep in mind that what Carson terms the “web of life” is made up of intricate relationships between “plants and earth”, “plants and other plants” and “plants and animals”. Dai seems to echo such sentiments in a poem like “Be careful how you cut that tree” in *Midsummer Survival Lyrics* where she explains how cutting a tree can cause the direction of the winds to change or the climate to alter. Dai’s approach towards non-human lives is at once traditional as well as scientific.

4.1 Ideological Bases of Human- Non-human Relationships

Environmental destruction is a consequence of the ideological backbone of contemporary society. The perceived intellectual superiority of human beings over non-human creatures is one of the chief forms of exercise of hierarchy in contemporary society. “Manes[Christopher Manes] argues that knowledge about nature is always conditioned by historical and social formations of power”(Oppermann 1999, 3). Whatever is learnt about non-human Nature has been learnt through human agency. So, human beings have created the privileged narrative that non-human nature is inferior to human beings. Dai’s poetry subverts claims like human beings being more intelligent and therefore, more important than other lives.

Mamang Dai’s poem “Tug of war” in *Midsummer Survival Lyrics* contains a narrative about one instance when eight men were carrying an injured python towards their village. “The men were heaving and panting, using all their strength to carry the snake”(2014, 69). In spite of that, when they approach a river, the python suddenly wriggles free of the men’s clutches and escapes. Not only is the strength of eight men not able to keep them from being overpowered, but their collective ‘intelligence’ too proves futile.

That ‘development’ is an imported concept and can be done without has also been re-iterated by Mamang Dai in “The deification of nature”. Resistance to buying the concept fully is on. To quote from Dai:

In this environment where we live and what we call our land, land of our ancestors, we cannot crush the mountains or tear off the green covering saying this is what is getting in the way of development. The life of plants and worms and insects is very enduring. We have ample proof of this. So we, too, have to endure. Over the centuries this began to happen, side by side. (2014, 53)

Environmental crises, in her opinion, should push towards adoption of more sustainable value systems that would help re-define human-nature relationships with a view to prevent further desecration of the Earth. For this reason, Chandra and Das comment thus on poets from North-East India: “In their nostalgic explorations of the beauty of the hills, valleys, rivers, forests, and the world of biodiversity, they have lamented the rape of Mother Nature by the

Industrial Giants” (Chandra and Das, 65). Dai does not want to give up the traditional ethic of co-existence for the relatively new concept of ‘development’ which requires that one tear off green covering from land.

Scholars identified as ‘Deep Ecologists’ have attempted to solve the ‘degeneracy’ of the heavily anthropocentric and hierarchical human outlook with the solution of eco-centrism. “Deep ecologists favor egalitarianism between the species. They repudiate anthropo-centrism and supplant it with eco-centrism and its moral and spiritual implications” (Waller, 188). The proposition of “bio-centrism” is beneficial towards decreasing the influence of hierarchy.

Mamang Dai’s perceptions are inclined towards that of what Deep ecologists try to uphold. In her poetry, Dai repeatedly incorporates the idea that the relationship between human beings and other creatures like the tiger, the bat and the clouds is not only of necessary interdependence, but of equality. In “Other lives”, Dai says: “The land is a being just like us. We live the weather, share food, rice, water, salt. We go to war, kill each other with our weapons and are killed by a drowning river or an avalanche of rocks”(2014, 44). Human beings are a species of elements, and vice versa.

Confronting hierarchical relationships and eventually abolishing them is understood as the basis of an ecological society by Murray Bookchin, a devout Social Ecologist. Likewise, Mamang Dai is subtly political in her denouncement of contemporary value systems like development, materialism, and disregard for non-human lives. Dai speaks of how human beings are continually engaged in pursuits that drive them to fight other human beings, and marginalize each other, especially women and children, in the poem “The sorrow of women”. Also, one comes across the following lines in the poem “Gone”:

At night we sleep with guns and gulls
tugging at land and oceans,
and ropes coiled to barren rock
where once, flowers were to seed
pumping blood and singing voices. (2014, 5-9)

People cling on to rocks and rivers as they want to own them. At the same time, they sleep with guns as they are afraid someone else may claim ownership of the land they like to call theirs. So, in the eternal struggle to overpower another human being, human beings have chosen to objectify non-human nature. They have devised a way to feel powerful over other people by asserting their power over non-human nature. So, in a way, Dai too holds a viewpoint similar to Social ecologists, according to whom ecological problems are an offshoot of social problems.

5.1 Dai's New Ecological Vision

In the midst of practising faulty ideologies, people everywhere merely sing about, as Dai says, 'trees falling' and people's 'dreams breaking'. In Dai's opinion, they fail to realize that the solution is planting 'seedlings', as Dai suggests in her poem "Saturn". Irrespective of the roots of ecological crises, one important solution is planting seedlings. "Ecological erosion is of deep concern for the poetess and through her awareness of these erosions, she is visionary of a new world of ecology with planted green seedlings"(Chandra and Das, 36). Planting seedlings has been suggested by Dai as one way to restore balance and try and make it up to non-human lives.

The philosophy evoked by Mamang Dai is made clear enough in "The deification of nature" in *Midsummer Survival Lyrics*. Human beings should deify Nature in a scientific way. In this respect, she holds the view parallel to Carson, who thinks that "scientific knowledge" is necessary to moderately alter the 'environment' through appropriate dosage for the best interest of species co-existence. Non-human nature has endured thus far. It is time that human beings take their turn to endure, to act responsibly. Dai seeks to ascertain that that indigenous people worship nature is metaphorically true. It has less relevance as concerns the worship of rocks and trees through rituals. It has a lot more to do with an understanding that it is a give-and-take relationship that human beings share with all other entities on the Earth.

Dai also preaches a new spiritualism that is paradoxical but matter-of-fact. In the poem "The river", Dai states that the river is a "wayward god", "a drowning spirit" and a "strong-armed god"(2014, 16). The river is thought to possess a soul. It can drown people and things. The fact that one cannot persuade a river through human language tells that it speaks a different language. That does not entail that the river does not speak or act at all. The river, here, functions as a synecdoche for all non-human entities on Earth, who also, Dai believes, possess life.

Also, in her poem "Tsunami", Dai states thus:

Life is a bond of terrible art.
 Our souls are not our own;
 it belongs to a past of centuries,
 in the silent shift of a sliding rock,
 a sliver of mica,
 a wave, a chemistry;
 and the migration of mineral and salt
 into a ribbon of light. (2014, 23-30)

In consonance with Dai's ideas put forward in the poem "Tsunami", Scott Russell Sanders says: "Our breathings still flow through the pores of trees, our food still grows in dirt, our bodies decay"(Sanders 1996, 194). According to Dai, "Our souls are not our own". Our souls belong in part to all the salts that had sustained our ancestors

and still sustains human beings. Life is art. It slithers across different media like rock and salt. It becomes immanent in more than one physical entity.

Dai's poetry is an attempt at reminding people of more harmless value systems now long forgotten, and at the same time, making the best use of 'scientific' knowledge attained until present times to combat imminent ecological catastrophes.

CONCLUSION

According to Dai, non-human life is as important as human life. At the point where literature begins to consider this 'deep ecological crisis' of whether 'nature' should be allowed to thrive irrespective of their use value to human beings comes in the need to re-consider 'scientificity' of the entire state of being of all 'biotic' and 'abiotic' agencies in the ecology. Science is supposed to be rational. It is believed to represent unquestionable truths. However, ". . .the reliability of scientists in accounting for truth (based on the so-called objective observation itself,) is an unreliability"(Oppermann 1999, 6). Even science cannot be objective because it is a product of hierarchy. Scientific 'facts' are established by the privileged.

Therefore, Dai's approach as a poet is that of a woman belonging to the Adi ethnicity in Arunachal Pradesh in India who has received formal education patterned in the way inspired by the colonial 'masters', but who does not shy away from identifying herself with the traditional customs of her Adi ancestry. She vouches for concerns like doing away with the 'logic of domination' inherent in the way of the colonial masters that inspires discrimination based on gender, species, race and class. Dai proposes a "spiritual reciprocity" in their relationship with 'nature'. The aim is to break away from normalized but unjustified attitudes in an attempt to promote social egalitarianism and a harmonious relationship amongst all species. This is also because these forceful naturalizations instigate social competition and exploitation of the natural world.

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