



ART AND/ AS ECOLOGY : PERCEPTION OF ECOLOGICAL SUSTAINABILITY IN MAMANG DAI'S THE BLACK HILL

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Abstract

Cultural ecology provides a new paradigm for a sustainable man-nature relationship. As an emerging field of study in ecocriticism, it deviates slightly from the path of ecocriticism with its focus on the interrelation between texts and external natural ecosystems. Cultural ecologists explore the cultural ecosystems of language, literature, and other art forms in their co-evolutionary relation with natural ecosystems. The cross-fertilization between culture and ecology helps to provide experimental fields for testing cultural alternatives to the unwholesome outlook of modern mechanized society.

This paper probes into the differences between the modern dominant culture and the cultures of the sustainable indigenous communities and their ecological ways of life. The main argument is that Literature as a representation of culture can act as an ecological force in the cultural system. The present research attempts to situate Mamang Dai within the conceptual framework of cultural ecology proposed by cultural ecologists like Hubert Zapf and to demonstrate how these cultural transformations of ecological processes can bring about the evolution of societies towards sustainable futures.

Keywords: ecocultural, indigenous, sustainability, resilience, reinhabitation

Introduction and Context

The unparalleled degree of environmental problems we are currently facing necessitates a prodigious degree of change of loyalties to address those problems. This altered worldview will inevitably need to be more all-inclusive and must recognize the intrinsic value of all creatures. A paradigm shift with a focus on ecological thinking is required for modifying the modern world plagued by the epistemology of subjugation and dominance. Integrating ecological thinking involves a thorough understanding of ecology and living systems. Ecology is a niche discipline typically associated with science and social policy. But now, by aligning with culture and other diverse areas, it moves towards new dimensions of ecological thinking and eco-sensitive concepts. This cross-fertilization of the previously separated fields of ecology and culture makes it very productive and provides an operative site for critical self-reflection of modern culture.

Cultural ecology is a recent development in the field of ecocriticism which focuses on the interaction and interrelationship between the culture and ecology in addressing environmental issues. It takes a middle path between anthropocentric cultural studies and nature-centered radical ecocriticism (Hubert Zapf), without reducing one to another. Originally the ecocritics, in their attempts to highlight and identify the environmental issues in the text, undermine the significance of art and aesthetics in environmental communications. The ecological potentialities of art and literature, as modes of cultural productivity, begin to capture the attention of ecologists only recently. But the framework of ecological thinking in art and literature is distinct from the ecology of science disciplines. It generates and enacts ecological thinking, through its aesthetic transformation of knowledge and experience. The creative matrix of art and literature offers imaginative spaces for generating and enacting ecological knowledge. As P.B. Shelley, notes in his essay, "A Defence of Poetry", "We want the creative faculty to imagine that which we know" (n.p).

The ecocultural budding of literature, in the sense of an aesthetic form of sustainability, is nowadays at the cutting edge of research in academia. "The power of literature" as Zapf rightly observes, "is not a power in the sense of dominance or domestication

but a power of production and creativity...” (p.14). Imaginative literature reconfigures ecological thinking *literally*, and it is not just an allegorical or stylistic elaboration of scientific ecology. On the contrary, sustainable texts with their focus on environmental justice can display the preservative and destructive mode of people’s treatment of nature and its enduring impact on the sustainability of civilization. By offering transformative sites of self-reflection, literature offers space for critically evaluating the malign and dominating beliefs, truth claims, and modes of human development.

Ecological thinking leads to environmental sustainability. In the present world of vulnerable ecological situations, sustainability has gained immense popularity as it is poised as an alternative to the modern civilizational model of development. The German equivalent of sustainability, *Nachhaltigkeit* is a term initially used in the context of forestry “to characterize a management of forests that would not deplete resources, but allow the renewable natural resources to regenerate and thus ensure its exploitation in the long term” (Kagan 9). In its wider sense sustainability searches for a way out of unsustainability.

In the cultural context, several advocators of sustainability consider western culture, as a cultural model of unsustainability and civilized crisis(Kagan). David Abram 1997 in his book, *The Spell of the Sensuous* also makes a similar observation and argues that Western civilization has developed an exploitative relation to nature in stark contrast to indigenous vernacular cultures which have retained an ability to respond qualitatively to their natural environments by maintaining “ a relatively homeostatic or equilibrial relation with their local ecologies”(63).

Cultures of unsustainability deviate from a development model targeted toward sustainability. Very often they turn out to be hollow and banal and generate unsavory implications as well. Kagan traces the symptomatic illness of modern distressed projects and states that “the culture of unsustainability developed an advanced form of cultivated autism in the relationships of modern societies and modern individuals with their environments”(17).

In this paper, I examine how indigenous literature work towards an ecologically oriented ontology through its ethical engagement with sustainable native cultures. It critically examines the cultures of dominance and contrasts it with the sustainable culture of the Adi and Mishmee indigenous communities in Arunachal Pradesh, as it is presented in Mamang Dai’s novel, *The Blue Hill*.

Review of Literature

Ecology is a branch of biology, that studies the relationships between living beings, and their physical environment and it looks at ecological science to furnish the substances of its deliberations. But ecology in its aesthetic sense is distinct from ecological science. Though science recognizes ecology as a discipline, it does not accept ecological thinking as a scientific enterprise. But art and literature, though distant from the areas of scientific investigation, create and enact ecological thinking. It achieves ecological thinking through forms and methods explicit to art and literature. Drawing on the difference between ecological science and ecologically-oriented discourses, Lorraine Code in her book, *Ecological Thinking: The Politics of Epistemic Location*, claims that aesthetic representations, “... concludes situated inquiries together, maps their interrelations, consonances, and contrasts, their impoverishing or mutually sustaining consequences, from a commitment to generating a creatively interrogative, instituting social imaginary to denaturalize the instituted imaginary of mastery that represents itself as “the [only] natural way” of being and knowing”(51). In her view ecological thinking as an epistemology should be “sensitive to human and historical-geographical diversity” (21) and should articulate principles of ideal cohabitation.

Buell in his book *The Environmental Imagination* advocates a movement toward ecological thinking, that defies the traditional Western notions, which consider knowledge-making as a mode of dominance over the natural world. He rightly observes, “If, as environmental philosophers contend, western metaphysics and ethics need revision before we can address today’s environmental problems, then environmental crisis involves a crisis of the imagination the amelioration of which depends on finding better ways of imagining nature and humanity’s relation to it. (Buell, 2). Here he argues in favour of an alternative path to rectify the pathologies that affect society.

Sustainability as a concept first emerged in the Brundtland Commission Report released in 1987 and it looks at the predatory model of development adopted by different nations that will ultimately lead the planet to a breakdown. The commission focuses mainly on sustainable development and perceives exploitation as a transgenerational justice issue. It defines sustainable development as those modes of development “...that meet the needs of the present without compromising the ability of future generations to meet their own needs”. But Leonardo Boff, the famous Brazilian theologian, philosopher, and environmentalist in his book *Essential Care: An Ethics of Human Nature*, argues in favour of creating sustainable societies rather than focusing on sustainable development. He is of the view that the concept of sustainability is monopolized by economic development, and it is more anthropocentric in its vision. Therefore he adds the idea of care to the definition of sustainability and defines it as a society:

...capable of taking on new habits and planning a type of development that cultivates care for the ecological balance and that functions within the limits imposed by nature. This does not mean a return to the past; it rather means to offer a new focus for the common future. It is not simply about not consuming, but about consuming responsibly. (97)

While sustainability contradicts short-term, profit-driven economic developments, it necessarily presupposes an alternative notion of cultural creativity which is oriented toward the preservation of the natural and cultural ecosystem. For the successful adaptation to the goal of sustainability, art and literature as a form of cultural creativity can effectively demonstrate sustainable experiments in their representations.

Literature engages with sustainability in an imaginative way by offering a space to explore the complexities of sustainability. It poses questions regarding man’s sustainable existence and at the same time offers models of sustainable societies. (Le Menager and Foote) argue that “the most complex and wide-ranging intersection between literary studies and sustainability lies at the intersection of literary forms and social affiliation”, that is, ‘in how literary forms prompt us to imagine, as communities, a world otherwise”(575).

As Zunshine notes “Cognitive critics have begun to discover that this sort of imagining stimulates the brain’s built-in theory of mind, a primary index of social skill that gets exercised through encounters with characters thinking about what one another might be thinking in the novel” (qtd in Le Menager and Foote, 575).

Zapf, in *Literature as Cultural Ecology: Sustainable Texts* offers a new perspective on reading literature to see the sustainability of texts in the context of cultural ecology. He establishes literature as a potential medium for the demonstration of cultural knowledge and ecological thought. In his view literature works at two levels, “...literary works of art are two things at the same time: they are laboratories of human self-exploitation, ... and they are imaginative biotopes” (92).

Literature contributes to sustainability in an imaginative way. It can raise complex conceptual questions and at the same time can offer models of sustainable living. The discourse on sustainability raises questions about the complex structure of society. In the book *Literature and sustainability: Concept, text and culture*, sustainability is perceived as a survival project as it is premised upon a notion that “...that ecosystems exist in a state of flux and discordance within which humans have considerable (though not absolute) latitude to co-construct the nature in which we live; thus it would engender moral, ethical, social choices as to what type of ‘sustainable society’ we might construct” (Dana, John, and Louise, 4).

Mamang Dai is one of the authoritative voices from North East India. Being an Adi woman, she attempts to capture the serenity of her landscape and the richness of her culture. North-East India with its unique culture and rich biodiversity and ecology-based livelihood contribute to the establishment of eco-sensitive literature. Each community in this region is a living institution on sustainability and biotic conservation. Their ecocultural identity offers holistic and commendable models for nurturing the ecosystem. A reflection on the ideological episteme of the indigenous culture of North East India offers powerful lessons on the management of natural resources. It links conservation and preservation through their oral narratives, myth, legends, and folklore.

North East India is home to more than 220 ethnic groups. Their art forms, through their representation of their lifestyles, games, and agriculture reflect their culture. Many indigenous cultures in North East thrive by fostering a habitable ecosystem for all species. Their ecological wisdom, resilience, and harmony ensure social well-being as well as ecological stability. Their microcosmic cultural representations are potent enough to engage in ecological dialogues on a macrocosmic level. Similarly, their literature operates as a cultural ecology and highlights the value system of their traditional ecological culture.

Mamang Dai’s *Sahitya Akademi* award-winning novel *The Black Hill* is an attempt to unearth the unwritten stories of the northeastern tribes in India. The novel is set in mid-Nineteenth century Arunachal Pradesh, while the Europeans were attempting to make inroads into this untouched paradise. The novel moves around the simple life of an indigenous couple at a time of social and political changes and unrest. Though the novel is set as the story of Kajinsha, a young man from the Mishmi tribe, who falls in love with Gimur, a girl from the Abor tribe, it essentially takes us to the unglorified life of the indigenous communities specifically, the Adi and Mishmee communities.

The novel is set in the 1840’s and is woven around two historical events - a French priest, Fr. Krick’s mysterious disappearance, and the execution of a Mishmee chief for his alleged murder of Fr. Krick. In the novel, Mamang Dai gives a realistic account of the events after the first contact of the Mishmee tribe with the good-natured and overzealous priest Fr. Krick. He reaches the unexplored land of Arunachal Pradesh on his way to Tibet, with the good intention of spreading the message of peace and love. But his zealous and passionate attempts do not bear fruits and ultimately lead to the tragic end of himself and the protagonist Kajinsha.

In writing this novel, Mamang Dai aims to collect the oral history of her people and document it with durability. She also wants to rectify the whole history of misrepresentations of her people in occidental discourses. She makes it very clear in the last chapter of her novel. Kajinsha, while waiting for his death warrant, passionately urges, “Tell them we were good. Tell them we also had some things to say. But we cannot read and write. So we tell stories. Stories...words...I too have words...” (288). The uncharted history of the Northeast becomes a recurrent motif in the novel. The sense of erasure of their cultural and socio-political identity in the advent of colonization is the central concern of this novel.

Mamang Dai takes us on a guided tour through the villages and reveals the relationships that exist between different indigenous communities and also with their lands. Mamang Dai delineates a different world order, in which the preservation of peace, simplicity, and harmony is perceived as the greatest value. Their simple, and unsophisticated lives entrenched in their un-spoiled culture is apt to give solutions to many of the crisis of the modern world. Zapf rightly observes, “Literary texts provide a transformative site of cultural self-reflection and cultural self-exploration, in which the historically marginalised and excluded is semiotically empowered and activated as a source of artistic creativity, and is thus reconnected to the larger cultural system in both deconstructive and reconstructive ways” (141). She introduces us to their faith and culture. By bringing to the fore the quintessence of Adi and Mishmee culture, Mamang Dai, provides a generative medium for the self-renewal of the cultural ecosystem.

The novel offers a model and strategy of “resilience” for coping with the calamitous ecological and cultural changes that throw challenges to man’s existence’. “Resilience” is an ecological term that has recently gained currency in ecocritical studies and it “refers to the ability of a system to absorb disturbance and reorganize while undergoing change so as to still retain essentially the same function, structure, identity, and feedback” (Walker, 20). The novel depicts a vibrant community in which human beings are one with nature and confront challenges with an iron will. When the white masters try to subjugate the land, the indigenous people rallied against the white. Kajinsha’s father led the rebellion and in the end, the mighty colonizers are thrown away from the land. “Yet his father had gone to fight in the Khampiti rebellion against the superior force of the British.... In the end, it was what had killed him, thought Kajinsha—that desire to keep ownership of his land and live in these high valleys free of strangers” (Dai, 113-114). Though he is killed in the revolt, he fiercely resisted the advent of the strangers. What prompted men like Kajinsha’s father for such a sacrifice is their impulse to stand and fight rather than submit their rights and ownership of the land.

Non-industrialized, indigenous societies have a different view regarding man’s position in Nature in comparison with the common Western notions. These communities hold an entirely different consciousness regarding their position on earth, and they are

mostly relational and reciprocal. Halton notes about the opposing worldviews possessed by the indigenous and western communities. In his view, “indigenous communities typically display a *philosophy of the earth*, an orientation to respectful, reciprocal, co-existence, whereas dominant global modern culture promotes a *philosophy of escape from the earth*. (Halton, 15). When the dominant western philosophy advocates individualism and detachment, the indigenous people have lived well and caringly on the earth for generations. Kajinsha relates their alternative course of learning and development to their relationship with Nature, “We read the land. The land is our book. Everything here on this hill, the grass and rocks and stones is saying something. And what falls from the sky—rain, thunder, and lightning— are also the voices of spirits telling us something. It is how we have learned what is good and what is sweet or bitter by living here and remembering what happens during the day and the night, every day, for hundreds of years” (Dai, 140).

Rosi Braidotti defines the concept of sustainability, claiming that it stands for “a regrounding of the subject in a materially embedded sense of responsibility and ethical accountability for the environments she or he inhabits” (qtd in Zapf, 19). Mamang Dai presents the majority of her characters with a sense of sustainable becoming and maps out their sustainable transformation. She establishes their ethnic identities of them as the children of the soil. Kajinsha is presented as a custodian of treasured native knowledge. He gained it out of his sustainable attachment to the land. Mamang Dai notes about his sustainable becoming, “The land was there for him to explore at will. The trees were a swathe of green that revealed its secrets to this man who knew their hidden paths and frozen routes over the mountains that kept the tribes apart” (Dai, 35).

Mamang Dai sustains the issue of ecocultural sustainability further through the introduction of Fr. Krick a white man as the second protagonist. He is projected as a person acquainted with the limitations of the so-called civilized, materialistic dominant societies. Although he has been a member of a globalized culture, finally estranges himself from it. He has been skeptical of civilized society and an ecological reinhabitation occurs in him. After becoming a priest, he feels secluded from his luxurious background. He senses a void in social and cultural life that is based on social and economic dominance. On reaching Arunachal Pradesh after leaving his hometown in Paris, he is lured by the enchanting tribal culture which appears to him as heartening and invigorating. He is gravitated toward their life filled with harmony and tranquility. He relates this transition in cogent terms:

There were those summer days when he walked in the garden of the seminary in Paris. Life was gentle and obedient; his days and nights spent in prayer. But here? The thought hung in the air. He opened his breviary and knelt by the rocks thinking—Yes, there is a world where I come from, and another kingdom that lies beyond. And there is a world here that is drawing me in step by step into the life of water, stone, and the language of thunder, birdsong, and the shriek of the mountain sliding down. (141)

The novel makes a scathing attack on the acquisitive edified culture and attempts a glorification of the tradition-bound old culture. In this novel, Fr. Krick being averted from the civilized society, is drawn toward life in communication with Nature. By allowing the protagonist to experience the aesthetic aspect of life among the tribes, Mamang Dai discloses the overlooked sublime influence of Nature on the indigenous community. Fr. Krick, who gets an opportunity to estimate both the systems rejoices in the beatific experience of nature in the untouched land of Arunachal Pradesh before the intervention of the colonial powers. Fr. Krick records:

“The air was pure and nothing like the sewage from the squalid Paris streets spilled into the river. Mysterious are the ways of the Lord, indeed! he thought. No one told me it would be like this, living in exile from a world I once knew, but I am happy. If there is meat and yam to roast on a fire a man can be content with no mark of Cain among brothers who share and share alike. (Dai, 137)

Fr. Krick compliments their well-preserved culture, tradition, customs, and beliefs. Though the conflict of cultures annoys him, his ecocultural contemplations ultimately relieve him from the materialistic world. He has a quest for self-realization and he achieves it by following the principles of natural theology. He senses a similarity between the Christian spirituality and the spirituality of indigenous people which is a sort of syncretism. He thinks “Was it not the same with the holy sacrament and prayer? Mercy and peace, a sacrifice of praise... When we close our eyes to pray we become believers. When the shaman chants and the women sing they forget everything. They are singing love, singing hope”(186).

A sense of belonging to the region in which one lives is at the very heart of sustainability. It is helpful in defining our ecocultural identities. An understanding of the natural cycles, along with a sensitivity to the disturbance of the ecosystems is an important part of education. She presents a host of people who are sensitive and sensible participants in their local bioregions. Her people live in a complex, and productive relationship with the environment. Their reinvigorating traditional practices, myths, and oral narratives provide insights into sustainable, and respectful human cultures. In the novel, Kajinsha acknowledges the ecological wisdom that his father has transferred to him, “My father also told me that everything on earth and sky are connected since we are born of the same mother. It is very simple. We belong to the land. The land is a good mother. I take only what I need. Animals and trees offer themselves. We help each other survive”(Dai,141).

Pre-colonial Mishmee village is presented as the dwelling place of a benevolent and contented people. They are altruistic and uncommercialized in their outlook. Before the arrival of the white masters. Despite their occasional bad harvest, through their hard work have earned enough for leading a satisfying life. Their communication with nature makes their life meaningful. Fr. Krick is awed by the simplicity of tribal life. Materialistic things have little place in indigenous tradition. They are attached to every object of Nature and nature positively responds to them. That is why Fr. Krick prefers the Mishmee people’s culture to the civilized society that he leaves behind. He elucidates the simplicity, tranquillity, and spirituality of primitive life exhibited by the Mishmee people,

“The sky and hills were becoming familiar and entangled in his heart. Perhaps this was home now. When he first came to these parts, he had thought he had reached a place where everyone was engaged in a war of extermination, one clan against the other, but here he was again surrounded by the patient, dreamy beauty of undisturbed life around him. What belief did men and women cherish that kept them tilling these cold fields from dawn to dusk?”(Dai, 243).

Kajinsha, the protagonist of the novel is presented as leading a peaceful and blissful life in his village along with his tribesmen. He is a primitive pioneer and a self-seeker within his society. He could read and learn messages from the woods and

sounds. He exists as a guardian angel for his community. As a visionary chief, he always exhibits his consideration for his people and their well-being. He endures lots of hardships in his attempts to defend his territory against foreign intrusions. In Dai's novel, he is not responsible for the death of the French priest Krick. But he falls prey to an assumed story that leads to the vengeance of the other clans.

Mamang Dai's portrayal of Fr. Krick's sense of wonder at the indigenous life and culture stresses the need for reclaiming the natural charm of the life and culture of the quiet people living away from the so-called progressive society. Being desireless and undeceptive, they are happy. Mamang Dai captures the serenity of her land in telling terms, "This was a holy place. There was no deception here. Everything he beheld was true to its original nature. This included the tribes he had met and the people of Mebo who, in the estimation of many like him, were considered uncivilised and debased natives. They had treated him well. He knew many of his countrymen and the British captains would not survive in these jungles without the help of the natives(Dai, 184). The indigenous people can communicate with nature and understand it thoroughly. As Fr. Krick acknowledges, the technological mindset of the mechanized societies needs to incorporate the wise and sustainable ways of indigenous people.

Mamang Dai through her novel allows the non-native readers to enter into the world of indigenous people and their culture. She also attempts to present a contrasting picture of the two cultures: the indigenous communities and the western masters. Working on this contrast, she claims that communities living in solidarity with nature remain simple and peaceful. She hints at the anomalies and inadequacy of the western knowledge system in their understanding of the real natural wisdom of the native people. Fr. Krick, as a foreigner, initially fails to recognize the beauty of this shared heaven and its people. As a European man, he has a very prejudiced notion about the communities but a reinhabitation happens in him and he could establish an undetachable association with the land. By stopping to be its exploiter, he could understand the symbiotic ecological relationships that operate within it. Ultimately, he becomes a true native of the place by relating fully to the places where he settled in Arunachal Pradesh.

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