



## REINHABITATION THROUGH MYTHS AND MEMORIES: A BIOREGIONAL CONSCIOUSNESS IN MAMANG DAI'S *ESCAPING THE LAND*

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### ABSTRACT

Orature has been the most significant cultural practice across societies for centuries. Beyond its role as entertainment, it serves as a regulatory force, fostering social life, coordination, and communal ties during particular events and ceremonies. Bioregionalism plays a major role in regaining the native life of a bioregion, based on the aspects of ecology, economy, culture, and literature. Transmitting ancestral beliefs and culture through literary narrative creates an open medium for reaching the young generation. This article has focused on exhibiting the integral tie between past stories and present life in the tribal novel *Escaping the Land* by Mamang Dai. It analyses how stories become a screen in reflecting the reciprocal relationship of people and place. Through reviving old myths and stories, reinhabitation sheds light on rebuilding the intrinsic value of place and its inhabitants. It articulates how twentieth-century people relate their present life to past stories to get both psychological and philosophical knowledge from their culture.

**KEYWORDS :** Mamang Dai, Bioregionalism, ancestral stories and reinhabitation.

Storytelling shapes humans by understanding their community and their inner world, including animals, plants and natural elements as a part of a particular place. After the evolution and transformation from oral to written literature, authors use this as a narrative technique to transfer their memories, knowledge systems and identity to the world. Folktales, myths and oral traditions disclose the great valour of legends, ancestors' emotional and spiritual relationships with the land. Bioregionalism encourages writers to revive the old, unknown stories of the place to reinhabit the place by creating imaginary narration. It pinpoints the need for ecological wisdom to lead a sustainable and coexisting life. Reinhabitation, a key principle of Bioregionalism, advocates storytelling as a cultural archive for understanding the place's beliefs and ideas about life. The work *Writing Nature: Silko and Native Americans as Nature Writers* by Lee Schweninger supports the innate connection of human and land in decoding the historical stories of place as a bridge between people and place. "...the earth, the word, the speaker of the word, and the story are inseparable. They exist within the same lines of dependence as the biosphere" (Schweninger 57).

Northeast literature in recent decades represents oral narratives and deep cultural beliefs through literary works as a reservoir. Mamang Dai is a key figure in northeast literature and dedicates herself to revive and recollect Adi culture through her writings. She strives to create a bridge between the past and present world of the Adi people, whose experiences are shaped by intertribal wars, colonisation, industrialisation and modernisation. Dai's *Escaping the Land* novel deals with the modernising state of Arunachal Pradesh and depicts the political pressures, insurgency and the rise of militancy among the tribal people. Amid this commotion, Dai provides a space for mythical and ancestral stories and showcases how these stories remain vital in people's lives and their kinship to the place. In creating a narrative space for stories, Dai incorporates elements as learning from elders, resistance, and the historical continuity to develop the plot.

Dai constructs her novels to transmit the cultural knowledge from elders to the young generation. Gagil, an elderly woman in Pasighat, teaches her granddaughter Kampo about the traditional food habits of the Adi tribe. In a gathering, Kampo questions, 'Why do you people always prefer those boring old stories to be performed in every gathering?' Gagil explains the necessity of remembering mythical stories and the celebration

of the Aran festival, which has held mythical stories for centuries. Miri begins to chant a song about the land of kojum-koja, believed to be the beginning of human life, and after multiple journeys, they reach the current world. A battle occurred between the star people and the lord of waters. Star people killed the lord's son, which enraged the lord and led him to destroy the whole land. The brothers Nui and Gamro, known for their archery, once Nui's dog followed its master's arrow in a boar hunt and after losing its way, it reached the mother goddess Kiine Naane. The Mother goddess places a grain in his ear groove and sends him back to the man, asking them to remember and celebrate her on this day every year. He returns to his master, and everything is restored to normal by the green enchantress Nyanyi Mete. "Oh earth mother! Giver of grain! We bring you offerings to celebrate and honour you! Green enchantress of a lost world! We welcome you into our hearts, bringer of love and harmony!" (Dai 92) Dai pinpoints the elders to educate the young generation about the reasons behind every ritual and tradition. It teaches gratitude and mutual respect among the inhabitants, and illustrates the cosmological relationship that binds humans and the natural environment. The Adi people still celebrate and honour the green enchantress in the current generation as gratitude.

Dai has focused on explaining the connection between present life events and the past stories. Tanik is one of the leading politicians of Arunachal Pradesh in the 1970s, but his childhood is connected with a mythical background. He was born in the Daji clan of Sirkung village in the Ketak hills, where he was abandoned by his father and brought up by his grandfather and uncles. Tanik's grandfather expresses his anger towards his son's absconding, through the words of "...words—'exchange' and 'beads' and 'the storm.'" (Dai 130) It reflects the long-standing back narrative of sudden wealth to the Daji clan from the deep forest. A Daji man frequently hunts and stays in the forest; his passion for setting traps drew him to move deep into the wilderness. One summer night, he becomes unconscious and the environment turns mystical dream. In this situation, he encounters a beautiful, mysterious woman. He realises in the morning that he had spent a night with her and finds delicious food for him.

After the incident, he waits for the woman's visit, but he was unable to see her face every time, and eventually understands he had encountered a spirit wife. Once he begs her to visit while he is conscious and she agrees with certain conditions, instead of her, her brothers will visit and honour him before

dawn. If he treats them as per her instructions, prosperity follows him. Suddenly, his friend Kakir visits to remind him about his pregnant wife in the village, and then he compels Kakir to leave immediately after the meal. Once Kakir disappeared from the site, he went to the riverside and becomes unconscious. Later, he finds multiple gemstones in his hut, and he claims that spirit brothers have visited his place. He returns to his village and faces the most unexpected situation: Kakir died in the violent storm. He understood that Kakir must be the hospitality which the spirit wife expected for her spirit brothers. From that day Daji clan became prosperous, and they annually perform rituals and sacrifices.

Tanik's grandfather interprets his son's missing with the early Daji man's greed for sudden prosperity. In decoding his words, 'words' signify that his son might also meet a spirit wife, 'exchange' deals with the tradeoff between wealth and life, 'beads' symbolise his greediness and 'the storm' means his detachment from his folk and family. This symbolic representation explains how people associate their present problems with the ancestral story. Though it may create a vision of being mythical story, in the future Tanik accumulates wealth through illegal timber business and politics. According to the novel, greed runs in the blood of the Daji Clan, and it continues into the present generation. There is a term 'Enculturation', associated with cultural anthropologists, and it highlights the significance of educating the children about the culture through myths, folktales, ceremonies and rituals. It shapes the children's mind and character, thereby reflecting their whole lifetime. Dai articulates the elders' folly in not sharing the story and how it relates to his father's disappearance. Tanik might discover the significance of commitment in all relationships and the guilt associated with every error. It also changes the life of the Arunachal Pradesh tribes in future with his learned moral values.

Tom Lynch Cheryll Glotfelty and Karla Armbruster's work in the work *The Bioregional Imagination: Literature, Ecology, and Place*, explains the importance of literature in reinhabitation process, "Bioregionalism is rather new and scientific sounding, Blair observes, but its discourse is ancient and has always included storytelling" (Lynch et al. 22). Kellen, a forest officer in Khonsa village of Tirap district, works amidst commotion between illegal timber business and deep sacred forest. He visits his house once, notices an old suitcase and mountains out of his window, which reminds him of an old story. It represents his situation between his memories and his present illegal actions. These hills remind him of 'pat-koi', a place named for the sacrifice of chickens. Once, it was known that the eloped lovers used to take refuge in these hills and perform thanksgiving ceremonies. He felt sad about missing such past happiness in the present world through the words "Every day the streets were growing dimmer and the villagers more secretive and silent than they had ever been, as if awaiting something terrible." (Dai 193) He cares deeply for the villages surrounded by militants, and people might face a crucial situation in the coming days. Compared to cities and towns, villages are considered a peaceful environment with natural landscapes, innocent people and contented life, but militant involvement disturbs this harmony for the sake of someone's wealth. Kellen's love and care for his people and place are reaffirmed through the story.

Apart from just reminding the past merely as a ritual, people establish a psychological connection between the stories and their life situations. When Lutor arrives to see Kellen's body in the militant attack, he cannot resist the memories of his father's story about overcoming the emotional turmoil. Once Lutor's father went to war with his warriors, he encountered a woman perched in a tree, who suddenly shot an arrow at him. In a desperate attempt to save himself, he fires back with a rifle shot, and she falls like a haunted animal. Her attire and

the beads around her neck clarify that she belongs to that particular village. He was overwhelmed by guilt for killing a woman, and tried to help her. But his friend Dinu forced him to overcome these emotions and to leave her in that bloody situation. At the moment he decides she will be in his heart as an inerascable guilt. This story has made Lutor realise that Kellen's death will be a scar in his life forever. It pinpoints people's lives between humanity and practicality. Dai's creative mind focuses on explaining the philosophical ideologies through storytelling.

All these incidents reflect Dai's meticulous craftwork in constructing characters and their relationship towards their ancestral memory and place consciousness. By merging myth, memory, and lived experience, Dai explains how traditional narratives develop both coordinated and self-reliant ideologies in people's lives. Reinhabitation through old stories creates awareness among the young minds to value and respect their place-based identity.

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