

NORTHEASTERN POETRY: ECO-POETRY OF MAMANG DAI

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Abstract

Mamang Dai can rightly be adjudged the daughter of the nature, who silently listened, felt and expressed the painful echoes of the nature and natural phenomenon in her creative writings. The native of North Eastern region and a sensitive individual she has rediscovered and represented the land and the people in poetic framework for the receptive readers of the world. As an itinerant writer her experience led her to have inner urges to delve deep into the oral narratives as history of creation and she finds this record as wide spreading and all-encompassing as the sprawling branches of a tree. In fact if we put her poems into the genre of Eco-poetry, it won't be falsification. The poetry replete with all the deep and varied nuances of environment and ecology is called Eco-poetry. Eco-poetry is different from the poetic canon of Wordsworth Shelly, Keats or other nature poets who perceived the benevolent side of nature or nature as consort or nature as serving or nature as a guide, teacher, reformer etc. Eco-poetry encapsulates the man-nature relationship realistically in its diverse forms. How man has threatened nature living in its lap, the relationship between environment and culture, between modern technology and its effects on nature and environment. The eco-poet impersonates the environment and feels the drastic effects of human actions upon nature and environment. The present paper analyses the selected poems of Mamang Dai from the perspective of Eco-poetry.

Keywords: Eco-poetry, North-Eastern poetry, Drastic Effects, Itinerant writer

Mamang Dai can rightly be adjudged the daughter of the nature, who silently listened, felt and expressed the echoes of the nature and natural phenomenon in her creative writings. She accepts in her interview that she belongs to a tribal region and a nursery of nature constitutes her psyche: “I am tribal, and the geography, landscape, our myths, stories, all this has shaped my thoughts”.... The native of North Eastern region and a sensitive individual she has re-explored, rediscovered and re-presented the land and the people in linguistic framework for the receptive readers of the world. As an itinerant writer her experience led her to have inner urges to delve deep into the oral narratives as history of creation and she finds this record as wide spreading and all-encompassing as the sprawling branches of a tree:

I have learnt a lot travelling through different parts of the state, from talking with miri –shaman healers as mythology and spiritual belief are an area of interest for me. I am particularly influenced by our oral narratives dealing with creation myths. This is like an archaic, intricate, sparkling epic poem that opens up another world like the branches of a living tree.

Mamang listens to the silent voice of nature and encapsulates the silence of nature into her poems. In fact, if we put her poems into the genre of Eco-poetry, it won't be falsification. The poetry replete with all the nuances of environment and ecology is called Eco-poetry. The term Eco-poetry has come into currency recently and has been recognised as a subgenre of poetry. Poetry has always touched or reflected nature's paraphernalia. It has also shown nature as teacher, friend, divine and its romantic as well as cruel side. Now it has started showing ecological concerns and messages of nature. Poets create the voice of natural phenomenon which has been and is being crushed by human need and greed. From the poetry of pre-romantics and romantics like Blake, Wordsworth, Shelly, Keats to the Twenty first century poetic output *The White Poem* by Jay Ramsay & Carole Bruce (Rivelin Grapheme Press, 1988), *Bosco* (Hearing Eye, 1999; 2001) and (more recently) *Heavy Water: a poem for Chernobyl* (Enitharmon Press, 2004) did not use the term 'Eco-poetry' but showed the ecological concerns. The term came into critical and theoretical use widely with one of the landmark publication *Ecopoetry: A Critical Introduction* edited by J. Scott Bryson (2002), and the Journal entitled *Ecopoetics* which simplified the use of the term poetry denoting it as 'poiesis' ie a general writing as against the usual multiple literary definitions of poetry.

Thereafter many anthologies and poetry collections used the term Eco-poetry or Eco-poetics explicitly or implicitly such as Alice Oswald's *The Thunder Muffers* (2005), Forrest Gander & John Kinsella's *Redstart: An Ecological Poetics*, and the ground-breaking *Earth Shattering: Ecopoems*, edited by Neil Astley at Bloodaxe Books (2007).^[4]

What are the characteristic features of eco-poetry? James Engelhardt has defined that Eco-poetry shows 'responsibility' to nature as it is 'connected' to the world. The other theoretical perspectives such as Marxism, feminism associate eco-poetry with the 'questions of ethics'.^[5] Therefore the poetry or poetic enterprise that projects the vision of protecting nature and natural phenomenon, voicing the concerns for nature with sensitivity, and to bring environmental consciousness into society has come to be recognised as Eco-poetry. The prominent characteristics of Eco-poetry differentiates it from Nature poetry. Such as Eco-poetry does not become man's consort and does not include human viewpoint towards nature. This genre of poetry brings environment and nature into centre and puts humans into periphery. It showcases that it is the downfall of natural environment that may demolish the human system because human beings depend on nature not vice-versa. In the absence of proper biosphere, human beings would not sustain and survive but without humans, nature would sustain and survive. So the Eco-poetry pulls the nature from subaltern state of existence to the state of independent agency playing the role of active agent not a passive entity.

Mamang Dai believes in this concept of natural phenomena and its all-subsidary entities as active agents performing the life-sustaining role and accepts that 'writing is a process of transference and transfers all her inherent knowledge of mountain, river, cloud, trees etc into her Eco-poetry. During her career as a journalist, she felt the inner inkling to write creatively about her region, about regional myths surrounding the sustenance of nature as she writes "I wanted to write about life in the bowl of the hills and record all its hidden histories, the beautiful landscape and way of life, even if only for myself." Hills and Mountains leave ineradicable imprints on the sensitive soul of the poet and she engraves beautiful lexicalised images for progeny.

The mythological history of the whole world is replete with the sagas of mountains and hills as sacred, holy and identified with reverence as they provide support to their existence on earth for people of many different cultures. Mountains are also imagined as 'the world's axis' or the 'multiple ideas of the center of the universe', revered in all cultures. Hinduism, Jainism and Buddhism refer to Mount Meru or Sumeru as the cosmic axis of the world. Mount Kailas in Tibet is believed to be the abode of Lord Shiva, Gunung Agung in Bali Indonesia is also regarded and revered on the pattern of Mount Meru. Mount Govardhana at Brindavan is revered for its association with Lord Krishna. Different cultural beliefs throughout the world assign certain hills or peaks mythical beliefs and religious practices. The holy persons or saints, sages and monks are enlightened on different mountains and groves. Therefore, many mountains are revered as places of spiritual attainment. For example Arunachala Mountain at Thiruvannamalai is revered by people and saints as a place for spiritual attainment. In Jainism twenty-three Tirthankaras have attained their spiritual deliverance on Mountain known as Shikharji, Parasnath station in Bihar state. They have their footprints on the mountain, thousands of people revere each and every footprint of Tirthankaras every day. Globally people seek blessings of Mountain as they assist in water supply just as Gangotri in Uttarakhand, the Himalayas, the Abode of Snow, as the source of sacred rivers, such as the Ganges, on whose life-giving waters they depend for their very existence.

Mountains play a momentous role not only in mythological narratives but also ecological sustenance and preservation of local ecosystem. The local people of a region have indigenous expertise in the relation between community's cultural identity and traditional patterns of land conservation. Sacred mountains are believed to be contributing to local biosphere, their topographic and bio-cultural richness and support the climate change adaptation and are the repertoires of plants and animals for the adaptation and survival. Communities maintain and preserve their natural resources in pristine conditions as these communities recognize the significant value of natural resources within mountains which nurture flora, fauna and humanity. Consequently communities have developed cultural beliefs in the form of worshipping natural resources. Almost since the prehistoric period almost all cultures of the world have ruling deities of water, timber, flora, fauna, and other natural resources who

maintain and preserve the biosphere for future generations. Sacred mountains have a special value that makes them worth protecting at all costs. Ideas and beliefs associated with mountains help promote conservation, restore damaged environments and strengthen indigenous cultures. In India Chipko movement in Uttarakhand in 1973, Save Silent Valley Movement of Kerala in 1978, Jungle Bachao Andolan of Bihar in 1982, Appiko Movement of Karnataka state in 1983 among others are some environmental movements initiated by local indigenous people to protect the local biosystem which supports their nature based survival. Ministry of Environment and various other government and non-governmental organizations should act in accordance with the values, ideals and experience of indigenous people in order to develop environmental policies and programmes for sustainable environmental management and maintenance.

Mountains have left an indelible impression on Mamang Dai who feels oneness with her mountainous surrounding and cultural sagas of region associated with mountain. She reads in her close study of natural surroundings, hears the unheard, unintelligible language of mountain and discovers how it has been a perennial witness of human history. Her poetic endeavour entitled **The Voice of the Mountain** portrays the persona of the Mountain who speaks as a living being witnessing the long history of the natives, culture and the place. The poet's imaginative faculties don't let her consider mountain as a nonliving entity rather as a living being who watches from the highest peak the journey of the ferries crossing the river. Ferries symbolically represent the journey of human race from birth to death in the lap of water. Waterless life is inconceivable. The first person pronoun 'I' stands for the soul of mountain outliving everyone and everything. The mountain as an intelligent observer 'sees', 'knows' and can describe the various episodes of this world. The end of the town seems to him as if blue colour of the heaven is casting its blue hues on earth rendering it mesmerising beauty. The anaphoras 'I can see', 'I know', 'I am...' emphasise the deep unifying amalgamation of the poet and the nature. She feels intricately woven with her objects of natural ambience as mountain, as cloud personified in an old man sipping the breeze, the dust and rain. She personifies ...

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 poet as the persona of the mountain sees the movement of the ferry lights crossing the big nameless river and envisions the chapters of the world beyond the physical geographical riverside location. Mountain is known for its immobility, as it sits permanently at a place but the peak is highest, the head is high so as to see the whole world from the uppermost peak. Staying at a place, it witnesses the vista from heaven to earth. The transition from 'I' to 'we' in the lines 'We live in territories forever ancient and new,/and as we speak in changing languages' unfolds the poetic consciousness shifting from individual perception to collective consciousness that all northeast people living, feeling, experiencing the same cordiality with the ancient natural surroundings with tints of novelty although speaking slightly different languages. From the identity of mountain she identifies herself with old man, symbolically ages old mountain still breathing the fresh air and surviving, she speaks

'I am an old man sipping the breeze
that is forever young'

'In my life I have lived many lives.'

The age of the mountains is thousands of years and they are immortal so in one life they live many lives semantically emphasises the permanence and being alive forever. The ferocious sound of the waves when they strike against it is the voice of it 'My voice is sea waves and mountain peaks', The creation of mountain is very natural creation not a planned creation therefore the biosystem has created many beautiful symbols to convey the message, the whole biosphere speaks through the flowers, trees animals, birds hills rivers and undoubtedly the highest peaks of mountains a chance creation symbolically speak histories and miracles of this world beyond spatial and temporal boundaries. The desert, rain, cloud mountain all are

interconnected and supportive to the meaningful existence of one another and for human beings as well. The visionary poet and eternal mountain know this mutual dependence:

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.

...

I know, I know these things

I know a cloud is a cloud is a cloud,

...

'Memory escapes the myth of time' childhood memories of living playing, crossing, sitting in the lap of mountain falsify the value of time. Memories are not structured into the set parameters of past present and future. Memories keep revisiting ,transgressing the boundaries of time in the lap of nature :

...

I am the child who died at the edge of the world,

...

I am the woman lost in translation

...

I am the breath that opens the mouth of the canyon,

...

I am the place where memory escapes
the myth of time,

I am the sleep in the mind of the mountain

The poet becomes mountain, knows the clouds, becomes the dead child, identifies with the women converted, becomes the gorge and valley, provides solace to memory, forgetful of time, the eternal peace in the lap of the mountain. Mountain stands as protective force, witnessing all the drama of life silently because it knows

In the end the universe yields nothing
except a dream of permanence.
Peace is a falsity.

The juxtaposition of 'sleep in the mind of the mountain' and peace is 'falsity' specifies to live life like a mountain who is eternally silent and peaceful internally but witness to life where peace is falsification, struggle is truth. The Poem replicates the struggling forces permeated into the human world and natural world.

The very title of another poem 'An Obscure Place' symbolically addresses the north eastern states lying into obscurity, waiting to come into human cognizance of the mainstream world. Very emphatically the poem also begins with the reference to the mountain as it has the mountainous identity, dislocation of mountains from its native literary canon will render it the existence of nonentity. The explicit acceptance of hills at the very outset of the poem and human victory of reaching its top never made the people realise their achievement because of the feeling of oneness with nature and natural phenomenon is very strong:

*There are mountains. Oh! There are mountains.
We climbed every slope. We slept by the river.
But do not speak of victory yet.*

People in the vicinity of adamant hills and flowing rivers never have an inkling of being winners or losers as they feel cordial relational terms with them. The ecocentric vision never became anthropocentric. The hills have always been hidden treasures to the hunters/visitors/foreigners but their toils to harm the hidden treasures are in vain as the prize slips

away. The poem indirectly addresses the issues and conflicts of the area, which have been detrimental to the nature and the people therein as

An obscure place haunts the hunter.
The prize slips away.
Yesterday the women hid their faces,
they forbade their children to speak.
...
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.

The physiography of this hilly region covered by the Eastern Himalayan Range, the Naga Hills, the Garo Hills, hinders the development of this area. There are **two massive rivers** : the Brahmaputra and the Barak River which is another reason of underdevelopment. It is also a nesting place for many separatists movements , Insurgency causing the deadly upheavals in the life of the residents. The fear of violent destruction caused by the cruel acts of people gets reflection into the lines...

Listen, the tone of a prayer is hushed...
...
See! They have slain the wild cat
and buried the hornbill in her maternal sleep.
...
weeping, like the waving grassland
where the bones of our fathers are buried
surrounded by thoughts of beauty.

A beautiful region is suffering now and weeping grasslands where dead forefathers buried in fact they were alive there was natural beauty all around but now the land is converted into graveyard due to multiple crises. The anthropocentric world view has proved to be pernicious to biosphere and resulted in ensuing Global Warming , extinction of species, future water crisis and other environmental dangers. Naess introduced the term 'ecosophy' which means deep conceptual understanding of ecological symbiotic relationship as he has said:

By an ecosophy I mean a philosophy of ecological harmony or equilibrium. A philosophy as a kind of sofia (or) wisdom, is openly normative, it contains both norms, rules, postulates, value priority announcements and hypotheses concerning the state of affairs in our universe. Wisdom is policy wisdom, prescription, not only scientific description and prediction. The details of an ecosophy will show many variations due to significant differences concerning not only the 'facts' of pollution, resources, population, etc. but also value priorities. (*A. Drengson and Y. Inoue, 1995, page 8.*) The idea Naess postulates his view of humans as an integral part of a "total-field image" of Nature. The terms ecosophy, ecological wisdom , green management , green auditing , ecological health are expressions of age-old values associated with natural environment reiterated in the wake of immanent ecological crisis of modern times.

This eco-wisdom is not emerged newly but has associations with ancient religious and cultural texts spread across the world. Hindu scriptures like all four major Vedas the *Rig, Sama, Yajur* and *Atharva* Vedas recognise the importance of maintenance of the seasons' cycles that are likely to get altered due to the climate change owing to inappropriate human actions. It is remarkable that the people in Vedic times regarded Nature and the environment in a holistic manner and revered each of its constituents and entities by carefully preserving them. "Do not harm the environment; do not harm the water and the flora; earth is my mother, I am her son; may the waters remain fresh, do not harm the waters... Tranquillity be to the atmosphere, to the earth, to the waters, to the crops and vegetation." This Vedic prayer invokes divine intervention to bless and protect the environment.

In Indian philosophical thought, the organic relation of humans to the biological nature has always been emphasized. That nature is an inseparable part of human and cultural discourse

has been articulated in the Vedas. Everything that exists is an emanation from and its essence of Brahman (absolute) which leads the Indian philosophers to use the language of 'Man is Nature', 'Man in Nature' and not 'Man against Nature'. Since it is the same Divine that is manifested in man and nature, the Indians avoid all issues of domination and subordination in ecological ethics. This unified view of man and nature is the fundamental truth and essence of what we call Indian World view and it would not be an exaggeration to consider this ideology as a great component of Hindu religion. Thus Mamang Dai feels this intrinsic relation of man and natural environment and invokes through her ecological poetry that Supreme power the creator to sustain all interdependent natural creatures through her Eco-poetry.

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