



Change, Modernity, and Northeastern Identity: A Comparative Study of Mamang Dai's *The Black Hill* and *Escaping the Land*

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Abstract

*Mamang Dai is an acclaimed poet and novelist, hailing from Pasighat, Arunachal Pradesh. She was awarded the prestigious Padma Shri in 2011 and has also received the Sahitya Akademi Award in 2017. Dai traces her ancestral heritage to the Adi tribe. As an author, she has mastered a diversified body of works, including poetry and non-fiction. The present paper aims to analyse two of her novel: *The Black Hill* (2014) and *Escaping The Land* (2021). This paper aims at tracing the elements of change and modernity in the two chosen texts, primarily revolving around Northeastern identity. The paper showcases how this identity has gone through various tumults and turmoil nonetheless, it also posits a rich cultural and ancestral heritage and takes pride in its unified tribal foundations. This paper then concludes that to sustain this identity, Northeastern heritage and culture must be given an equal and dignified importance as is imparted to national interests.*

I. INTRODUCTION

Literature from India's northeast carries an "environmentalist ethos" (Nag 9), as the land and the identity of its people remain closely linked. This paper examines the impact of change and modernity on the identity and sense of belongingness of the region's inhabitants. For this purpose, Adi writer Mamang Dai's *The Black Hill* (2014) and *Escaping The Land* (2021) have been chosen as texts for analysis. This enquiry is made through the perspective of Postcolonial theory and its basic tenets. It is important here to note that literature from the Northeast is a relatively nascent area of exploration. Most of the works from this region, however, reveal the following characteristics:

Individual experience, though coming to the surface from a crumpled and isolated State, ceases to be individual, limited and shrunken because it is a link in the chain of national existence and opens

out into the truth of the nation and of the world. What is particular becomes universal. The ethnocentric interpretation is no longer stuck in time, outside of history plunged into immobile existence. (Bhardwaj 3)

This paper will therefore first talk about the author and the texts in this introductory section, thereafter giving a brief historical and cultural overview of the Northeast and Arunachal in specific. A Postcolonial analysis of the texts then follows in the third section, which is further divided into four subsections. Towards the end a conclusion is written, discussing the overall findings and recommendations. A reference list is then attached at the back.

The texts chosen in this paper are written by *Padma Shri* awardee and acclaimed poet and novelist, Mamang Dai. Dai has written a plethora of works, such as *River Poems* (2004), *Mountain Harvest* (2004), *The*

Legends of Pensam (2006) and *Stupid Cupid* (2008). Her works engage “imageries, metaphors and similes” as well as the “consciousness of ecology and beliefs in the tribal pantheon of Gods” (Debnath 112). In an interview with Jaydeep Sarangi in 2017, Dai asserts that she traces the “history and migration of community” through her works. With natural descriptions, heritage reconstruction, and anecdotal storytelling, Dai shapes her narrative by recording people’s conversations on shifting times and ‘escaping lands’. As a poet, she “reflects on the deteriorating relationship of man and nature in the wake of capitalist greed and consumerism” (Debnath 118).

The Black Hill traces the story of the tribal communities of Mebo, Sommeu, and many others. Through characters such as Gimur, Kajinsha, and Father Krick, the author explores the implications of foreign settlements on native land and psyche. Dai has portrayed the interconnectedness of land with identity, and how history is biased for the one who writes it. It also depicts the bond developed between Krick and the natives, in specific Gimur and Kajinsha. This novel depicts tribal customs, traditions, and belief systems in detail. Colloquial expressions, religious beliefs, local legends, and oral traditions — all are retained in the narrative. This helps in comprehensively understanding the tribal way of life. Moreover, the contrasts between these traditions and the events after colonial encroachment provide ample space for a comparative analysis. Through these details, one can keenly observe the elements of change, “colonial modernity” (Nair 154), and challenges to Northeastern identity in the novel. The characters put strenuous efforts for preserving their land. Towards the end, they are caught in violent acts of seizure by the colonizers. Kajinsha dies, and Gimur is left alone to lament upon a land that has succumbed to conflict and loss, where lives of natives carry no more significance. Krick, too, dies in a foreign land. His story, as well as his death, symbolises the beauty of cultural exchange, the hope for a unified living, and a ray of spiritual quest amidst clash and conflict. It was for this novel that she was awarded the *Sahitya Akademi Award*.

Similarly, in *Escaping the Land* (2021), the impacts of globalization and national integration on the sustenance of tribal identity are portrayed meticulously. The story follows characters such as Lipun, Lutor, Umsi, Kellan, and several others. They fall witnesses to the changes that led to the formation of the present Arunachal, changes involving violence, loss, conflict, politics, and deaths. Characters such as Lipun somehow become a catalyst to these changes, therefore being guilt-trapped and “in-between” (Bhabha 4). Others, such as Lutor, are disillusioned with modernity, and many, such as Umsi and Mentiri, realise the loss of customs and traditions. Some like

Kampo detest the nothingness of the present. Therefore, this text reflects the consequences of changing times on the roots of tribal heritage. Kellan’s untimely death towards the end of the novel speaks to the state of anarchy. Lipun, too, dies. With him dying the hopes of better times. Symbols of cultural heritage, such as the woman named Maying, too face a demise. Other such symbols, such as the Rainman, who were present as active motifs throughout the novel, slowly fade away. Modernity becomes a curse, and people long for the past yet desire an improved future, leading to an identity crisis. This ‘ambivalence’ in the text portrays the constant struggle between tradition and modernity in the contemporary Northeast. The novel is a repository of historical events impacting the Northeast, giving it a perfect quality of factuality and authenticity. Dai reflects upon the impact of this history specifically upon her people, an aspect never looked into. This text is therefore apt to analyse the “third space” (Bhabha 37) in which the present Northeast finds itself currently in.

II. A HISTORICAL AND CULTURAL OVERVIEW

2.1 Tracing the Roots

India, a meta-nation, is an assortment of diverse communities with multiplicity in cultures, languages, beliefs, and mannerisms. Its northeast, however, is specifically celebrated as “nature’s gift” to the country (Nag 9). The region's earliest inhabitants migrated from several parts of East and Southeast Asia (Das 2015). Its ancestral race is grouped as the ‘Mongoloids’ (Das 2015), with some of the earliest settlers being the Tibeto-Burmese, the Indo-Aryans of the Gangetic Plains, and the Kra–Dai speakers (Bhagabati et al. 2001). Northeast’s current tribal heterogeneity is a result of such migrations. Even at present, an “ethnological transition” is observed in the region (Das 2015).

Its history is equally diverse. From 500 B.C. to 600 A.D., it was ruled by the Monpa kingdom, afterwards occupied by the Bhutanese and Ahoms (Lodrick 2024). It was most probably during the latter’s rule that external conflicts made the natives turn to the British for protection, which soon marked the onset of the British hold in the region. They soon annexed Assam. Out of Assam, further bifurcations were made, such as Nagaland, Mizoram, and Arunachal Pradesh. This cartography altered not only the political but also the cultural dynamics of the region, which soon “came to be viewed as the ‘North East’ ” (Dzüvichü and Baruah 1).

Arunachal is a state within this Northeast. Formerly a region within NEFT (North Eastern Frontier Tracts), it was a division administered by the British,

primarily housing the princely states. After India's independence, it was renamed NEFA or the North Eastern Frontier Agency (1951). It was not until 1972 that Arunachal became a Union Territory, constitutionally still included in Assam. Finally, in 1987, it was granted the status of a full-fledged state within India.

At present, China is actively asserting its claim over certain areas within the region, a claim the Indian government assiduously denies.

2.2 Culture and Tradition

Northeastern geographical symmetry is often mistaken for its cultural homogeneity, which is assiduously denied by its natives. This is why "indigenous writing from the North East is increasingly making an appearance through young voices who wish to excavate forgotten tribal practices" (Gokhale and Lal 242). At present, Arunachal has 26 chief tribes, with various sub-tribes existing. According to the census of 1981, "there are 110 tribes and sub-tribes distributed over the whole of Arunachal" (Mukhopadhyay 2).

Some of the major tribes are Monpas, Mishings, Khamtis, Idus, etc., linguistically belonging to the group of Tibeto-Burmese speakers of upper Assam (Osik 4). "Most of these tribes ethnically belong to same stock tracing their descent from a common ancestor 'Abo Tani' and a same mother 'Pedong Nane'." (Osik 4) Racially, all of them are said to belong to the Tibeto-Chinese Mongoloid origin group.

The encyclopaedia of Britannica mentions Arunachal receiving mentions in ancient scriptures, such as *Kalika-Purana*, the *Mahabharata*, and *Ramayana*. Dr. Prasanta Kumar Nayak explores the beliefs of such an ancient land rather categorically in her article "Myths and Culture-History of Arunachal Pradesh". Nayak outlines the following elements as forming the basis of Arunachal's cultural composition: "beliefs in cosmology, divinity and human-bovine-bond" (i.e. the bond with creatures and animals) (Nayak 91). These cultural beliefs act as the tribal "souled directives guiding the tribes across time and space in every step of manifestation of their history and culture" (Nayak 98).

III. INTERPRETATION OF MAMANG DAI'S THE BLACK HILL AND ESCAPING THE LAND: A POSTCOLONIAL ANALYSIS

3.1 Postcolonialism

Postcolonialism, in simple terms, studies the impact of colonization in the post-colonial times. It was established with Edward Said's 1978 work *Orientalism* and explores the impact of colonial rule on culture, identity and society.

It analyses different value systems, modes of representations, and reading practices. "Postcolonialism is an enterprise which seeks emancipation from all types of subjugation defined in terms of gender, race, and class. It does not introduce a new world which is free from the ills of colonialism; it rather suggests both continuity and change" (Rai 2). It has evolved as an approach by way of many developments in the socio-political order. Its genesis is deeply rooted in the "larger wave of new and politicized fields of humanistic inquiry, most notably feminism and critical race theory" (Elam 1). Postcolonialism is not a theory of the past nor of the future. It is situated in the present; it is concerned with the ongoing cultural scenario. Postcolonial studies, therefore, provide a scope for cultural revival.

Various concepts permeate this theory, which allows a multi-dimensional analysis of a chosen piece of work. In her article titled "Conceptual Frameworks in Postcolonial Theory: Applications for Educational Critique", Shehla Burney has explored the post-colonial concepts in detail, which have been employed in the present paper to explicate the selected works of Mamang Dai. Apart from the key concepts detailed by Burney, this paper will also employ the idea of 'Unrepresented Territory Paradigm' which is a "critical mechanism that voices the repressed voices of the subaltern and those who were considered inadequate for articulation" (Rai 4), to study how Dai delineates her characters and presents their transformation through change and modernity.

3.2 A Postcolonial Interpretation of *The Black Hill* and *Escaping the Land*

3.2.1. 'Hybridity' and 'Ambivalence'

Dai's portrayal of 'ambivalence' and 'hybridity' form the core of the two chosen texts. In *The Black Hill* for instance, assertion and pride in tribal identity against modernization and national integration becomes the central issue. It seems impossible to preserve one's tribal roots in a rapidly shifting world. These shifts lead to an overall degradation of the individual's identity, which leads to the loss of sense of belongingness. In such a context, Dai's works "revive the native spirit of the Northeast and give a picture of tribal ethos placed in the changing Indian social tapestry" (Lakshmi and Natarajan 340).

In *Escaping the Land*, 'hybridity' is evident in the character Lipun's dilemma. He is a soldier belonging to Pasighat, but is also a part of the system responsible for the changes: "He felt caught between a feeling of great humiliation and a pitying love for his homeland." (17) Lipun is conflicted between his desire to progress and his wish to lead an ordinary life with his lover, Umsi: "I wanted to live quietly, as a family man" (71). There is a longing to

return to the old way of life, but the dream of a bright future is equally enchanting. Such a conflict is the primary cause of the 'spatial homelessness' that overwhelms the characters throughout the narrative. Their resistance is not towards change but rather the days "lost in uncertainties, confusion and movement, without getting anywhere" (210). The author comments: "No law and order. No security. How can we live like this? (231). "It's peace they are crying for. It is the only thing they have scribbled on pieces of paper: 'Give us peace'." she asserts (199).

In *The Black Hill*, the character of Gimur aptly portrays this hybrid existence. Gimur is hesitant to accept the beliefs of her clan blindly — beliefs considered unquestionable. She exclaims to Kajinsha:

Even in your dreams!' She lifted her arms. 'You are always hiding— everything!' It always surprised her how superstitious he was. He believed in signs and omens and sometimes he would not to go out because he had had a bad dream ... (72).

In the character of Gimur, one can identify a sense of "exile" (Morgan 26) and a sense of "intellectual" (26) homelessness; she feels "displaced" (Morgan 55). There is an actual, physical displacement of Gimur to a new land with Kajinsha which is symbolic of a more significant, cultural displacement. As a character she wants to "go beyond" (50) and wishes to "get away from this place that bound you to...what? She could not be sure" (49). Gimur also questions the importance of land, which seems revolutionary, considering the importance of this asset in tribal heritage. She wonders, "what is so great about our village" (36):

Men fought and killed each other. Blood flowed. Brothers became enemies. How could the mere features of a landscape ignite such love and ferocity, Gimur wondered ... 'It is where you were born!' She had said. And how important was that? Gimur had wondered. (66-67)

Similarly in *Escaping the Land*, Dai portrays a land of postcolonial 'alterity'. This 'alterity' can be defined as the state of possessing multiple identities or having multiple cultural assimilations. Dai portrays a land infested with "machinery" (6), a "zoo" (3), a "national highway" (3), and a "big hotel" (3). However, this land also carries its cultural elements, for example: a "cane sofa" (3), a "bamboo hut" (6), and "rice fields" (3). This divide symbolically resonates with the psyche of the characters, their "vehemence of the past and the longing for the future" (158). There is a conflict between the duty "to raise a family and live in the place where he (man) had been born" (121). In this novel, however, what dominates is not colonialism

but rather the impact of a coerced national integration on the tribal identity and way of life. This, nonetheless, leads to a colonized existence, where the state, through its repressive (Althusser 92) and ideological apparatuses (Althusser 92), becomes the new hegemonic force.

Just as Gimur, characters such as Lipun are also present, who feel a sense of cultural and 'moral displacement', due to the loss of "value system" (154). Such realities make the native "primitive in mind but modern in physic" (Saha 318). In *The Black Hill* as well, this duality is visible:

You are far away from them,' he said. 'I feel them around me every day. Their boats are moving up and down the river. They bring salt and pieces of coloured cloth and our people rush forward to receive the petty gifts, stretching out their arms like beggars...' He stopped. (222)

In this novel, the author has portrayed tribal disagreements as well as taboo practices, such as the killing of twins at birth, the keeping of slaves, etc. However, she also presents their longing for peace, their similarities and cohesion: "But a war on the border would shatter the dream of peace that his [Kajinsha's] father had cherished" (99). This makes Dai's role more reliable. The priest's [Krick] experience stands true in this regard, for the people who "had argued, talked, walked together and surrounded him with threats of imminent attack, insult and robbery" were the ones giving him "food and shelter and showed out the way to go north towards Tibet" (95). Dai thus presents the 'pure knowledge' about her land and people instead of a politicized one.

With the help of temporal shifts to the past, Dai longitudinally measures the issues of identity, over a period of several years. As compared to the colonial times in *Black Hill*, issues in *Escaping the Land* are of internal security, globalization, greed, capitalism, and unemployment. Realities themselves — such as insurgencies, militant clashes, murders, riots, tribal feuds, fires, epidemics, famine, kidnappings, distrust of the government and control of the military over common lives — then become hegemonic forces. Dai comments in this novel upon "Politics, terrorism, conflict" as overriding issues (141):

He hated that he should feel terrorised in his own state and he hated that breathless, choking feeling need with his heart thumping every time he walked the street or entered his own house ... For any villager the Indian army is a terrifying prospect. If you say "army" or "sepoys" people don't even want to look on their faces! But now, what can we do now? We have seen so many wars and troubles in our history. Something always happens ... We will

watch and wait. It is the way we have survived ... (190-191)

Consequences of globalization and dismantling of ethnic traditions, too, find a place in the novel through characters such as Kampo, who posits a dislike towards ethnic customs and rituals. Others, such as Mentiri, show an aversion towards modernization — “Oh, the roads. The roads, they kill me”, she says (93). Dai’s characters thereby represent a duality typically found in postcolonial societies. Kampo exclaims — “Nothing happens! ... People always say you must return to your hometown as if it’s the law. Why should anyone want to return to this place? To do what?” (147-148). There is uncertainty — “We don’t know what destiny is until it finds us” (149) — and the conflict between finding a place “more secure” (99) and retaining traditional roots:

Who says it is a beautiful land? It is a hard and craggy land and we live like animals, only half a step away from cave-dwellers ... There is no law except tribal law and tribal law is arbitrary and brutish ... The jungle is a jungle. The river is a river. What is fabulous about the river, can you tell me? It is a river of sorrow ... We string up a black chicken and tie a dead dog on pole to appease the spirits and observe a long taboo for everlasting protection. Pathetic! It’s time that we grew up, don’t you think? ... (143)

Lutor understood how “closely all life and land is tied together” (208):

He knew this image was about Time and the transition of an unknown land into a modern state ... he willed for it to be the constant picture in his mind through which he would be able to draw the outline of new beginnings. It was always there ... the hope and desire for the images to fuse and settle so that past and present would evolve into a new picture of the future. (208)

This characterization is further enhanced in *The Black Hill*, where Dai’s representation of the colonial mindset and ignorance carries primal importance. She hints at the implicit, self-ordained ‘white man’s burden’ when Mrs Cutter teaches Gimur how to hold a pencil and write. Krick’s Bible, his medicine box, breviary, ink, paper and sextant — all are symbols of it. Nonetheless, Krick is also seen developing ‘belongingness’ in the same land that once seemed strange and “desolate” (43) to him. He displays an attitude of acceptance and wonder towards it, somewhere becoming hybrid himself. The tribal couple, Gimur and Kajinsha, too form a sense of compassion towards him.

Characters like Krick do away with binary oppositions, negating essentialism and exhibiting a ‘cultural

limbo’. This Bhabha termed in *Location of Culture* as the “in-between the designations of identity” (4) and the “interstitial passage between fixed identifications” (4). This “opens up the possibility of a cultural hybridity that entertains difference without an assumed or imposed hierarchy” (4).

Bhabha’s description fits the novel’s characters precisely. Nonetheless, Krick’s hybridity is not reductive, as in the case of the colonized, instead is more of an addition to his already stable sense of identity. This is what differentiates the experience of the colonized from the colonizer.

Krick’s infatuation is anxiety and appeal towards the unknown ‘frontier’ (Burney 188). This frontier is “mythic” (188) in nature and exoticizes its inhabitants as ‘the other’ (Beauvoir 10). Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak introduces the term “worlding” (247) in her essay *The Rani of Simur* (1985). It explains how native land becomes ‘imaginary’ and ‘colonized’ for the natives as framed by the colonizers. Dai predominantly asserts this idea by weaving herself in the narrative in *Escaping the Land*: “... as if I too were living in a specialised or imagined version of a land that we had moved far away from” (165).

However, the circumstances of Krick’s death end his story on a similar, ambivalent and hybrid note. He recalls the church but happily accepts the fact that “this is home now” (206):

... he was struggling to get up and walk to the site of the crucifixion and the tomb of the Lord ... He heard church bells and canon fire. All around him the trees were turning into clear wooden crosses and through the leaves a cathedral window was shining with streams of light pouring in through the stained glass. (126)

He [Krick] did not feel lost or disconsolate. He heard the sound of water, the breeze moving through the trees and he felt the land was drawing him in. 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. (206-7)

3.2.2 Cultural Resistance: Language, Customs, and Oral Tradition

Dai uses language as a form of cultural reclamation. Colloquial expressions such as “bidi”, “sarkari”, “jemadar”, “apong”, and “miglan” are retained in the texts. This acts as

an assertion of native speech and dialect, which Daroy explains in his paper as ‘abrogation’. He quotes Ashcroft in the process:

Abrogation is a “refusal of the categories of the imperial culture, its aesthetic, its illusory standard of normative or ‘correct’ usage, and its assumption of a traditional and fixed meaning ‘inscribed in words’.” (Daroy 3 - 4)

Attached with ‘abrogation’ is ‘appropriation’:

While abrogation is a mental stance, appropriation is a process by which the language (Center’s) is consciously brought under the influence of the vernacular and its cultural nuances. Raja Rao (1938) has expressed it more succinctly: “to convey in a language that is not one’s own the spirit that is one’s own.” (Daroy 4)

This argument is crucial, as Dai uses English to discuss her land’s history. In *The Black Hill*, it is seen how the “East India government had changed the prevalent use of Sanskrit in native primary schools and introduced English as the medium better suited for imparting ‘useful knowledge’ ” (Dai 52). The usage of the native language, therefore, suspends the “implacable dependence” (Basu 75) the colonized is thought of having on the colonizer. Moreover, native characters in the novel are seen implementing a similar method of articulation for retaliating against the colonial regime. For instance, substituting the term ‘foreigners’ with “the white devils” (25).

Dai’s cultural resistance is depicted in her use of customs and oral tradition as integral to her texts. The traditional drink “apong” (89) and the “ponung-dance” (88) of Arunachal, too, find representation in *Escaping the Land*. They act as symbols of cultural assertion. Mythology, too, asserts the northeastern sentiment and finds a significant place in the novels. Legends, visions, omens, dreams, and rituals carry equal importance in *The Black Hill* as well — “malevolent spirits” (32), “evil wind” (26) being several examples. These elements of ‘orality’ reassert and restore native identity in a rapidly shifting world. Fatih Mehmet Berk asserts in this regard that “Cultural identity is generally associated with myths” (2). Art, too, is implicitly hinted by Dai for its role in the revival of cultural roots and traditions. We see this in *Escaping the Land*:

Orin was in the mood to show some of the old pictures, everyone exclaimed in wonder at the remarkable line drawings of mythical women in green robes and life-like dogs sitting bolt upright among the throng of children circled around a dancing shaman. (148)

Orality is evident in *The Black Hill* as well. It begins with a story which the narrator herself is being told: “These are the words of a woman telling me a story.” (9).

Representation of Shaman culture is another aspect in both the novels. Shamanism has been considered a form of madness by many, while it holds a significant religious position in several parts of the world. George Devereux, for instance, is known for his claim of a shaman being “mentally deranged” (226). This represents the typical Eurocentric tendency of claiming the different as unusual, as Foucault has talked in his *Madness and Civilization*. Dai thus engages in the process of ‘nativism’ when she speaks of the Shaman culture in its real essence, as opposed to the discourse of the West. ‘Nativism’ is the “discourse of the indigenous communities of a given state” (Rappa 1). Moreover, the Aaran festival — of storytelling, dancing, and singing — is being celebrated in *Escaping the Land*’s second section. It is titled ‘Memory’. This memory is ‘collective’ (D’haen 2), as it speaks of the conscience of a land that aspires for lost tradition.

The concept of tribal justice, too, permeates the texts. It signifies tribal sovereignty. This sovereignty becomes ineffectual in front of the modern law, which leads to a state of anarchy. In *The Black Hill*, the narrator hints at her role of piecing together forgotten realities in such instable times: “There are many lost stories in the world and versions that were misplaced yesterday or a thousand years ago.” (9).

“My response to myth/stories is akin to a quest”, Dai speaks in the same 2017 interview. Her characters resonate with her completely: ‘Tell them about us,’ Kajinsha had said to her that night in the jail. ‘Tell them we were good. Tell them we also had some things to say. But we cannot read and write. So we tell stories.’ ” (243)

3.2.3 Land, Nature, and Nostalgia

Literature from the Northeast explores the interconnectedness between land and identity, a characteristic similar to African literature. *Weep Not Child* (1964) by Ngũgĩ wa Thiong’o is a suitable example.

In *Escaping the Land*, we see a description focused heavily on modernity: the city of Itanagar bustling with country buses, a new airfield, a stadium, “cyber cafes and new bakeries” (168). Dai portrays this scenery through Lutor’s eyes. The author remarks — “All along this stretch new construction had changed the landscape ... ” (Dai 62).

This modernity described here is ‘colonial modernity’ (Nair 154), introduced by Pramod K. Nair in his 2010 work, *Contemporary Literary and Cultural Theory*. Naik asserts:

This distinctive feature of postcolonialism is accompanied by a persistent spatial deconstruction and reconstruction, from the dislocation created by colonialism - where the colonized were deprived of their space and subjected to deportation and slavery, forced removal and expropriation, cultural otherization ... These movements in geographic space are paralleled by shifts in spatial imagery ... Repossessing the land and its true features, both natural and anthropological, went hand in hand with acknowledging and retelling its history, or rather its many stories, through time and within spatial dimensions. (Göttsche et al. 358-359)

'Cartography' is another manner in which colonizers extended this colonial modernity. In layman's terms, 'Cartography' is the process of mapping territories. In postcolonial discourse however, cartography is the "conceptual framework by which Eurocentrism and empire were constructed geographically and politically through power and knowledge" (Burney 179). Harry Garuba, a postcolonial critic, comments: "It is no accident that maps and metaphors of mapping abound in postcolonial studies because colonialism as a regime of power was largely organised through spatiality and subjectivity: spaces to capture, subjects to control." (Garuba 87) The redrawing of maps inscribes the reality of the conqueror on the 'space' of the native, making it a territorial symbol of power and control:

The unmapped open and vacant spaces on older maps represented an invitation to explore, discover, and conquer ... Cartography represented not just the fixity of geographic space but also the fixity of power entrenched within the Western symbols. (Burney 179)

We see this in *The Black Hill* specifically, where expansion of territory for one group symbolized extortion for the other:

It was a great show of British might and authority. The silence of the towering mountains was shattered and that morning saw the end of solitude and the beginning of war and sorrow in a land where the inhabitants had refused right of way to every stranger until now (Dai 224)

Loss of land leads to a loss of sense of belongingness. In *The Black Hill*, this land is depicted as " 'a place of ownership and rest'. Kajinsha's father had said over and over again. 'If a man clears the forest and builds a house and harvests his fields the land belongs to him.'" (Dai 101). For colonial authority, however, this land symbolises 'mercantilism', which propagated the idea that government control of land would lead to state prosperity (Burney 18). This land for the natives however is like a "being, just like

us, and to know the land you have to live here. When you are closely linked to the land, it speaks to you in little whispers and nudges. That is a feeling of happiness" (Dai 113).

In *Escaping the Land* as well, Kellan's resistance towards timber business sheds light upon his realisation of this exploitation. Lutor, too, laments upon this loss, "Hell is when you are losing control. He could feel it. I feel it. Everything was spinning away, reeling out of his hands" (Dai 277).

When it comes to natural descriptions, they form a much more important part of *The Black Hill* than *Escaping the Land*. The text begins with the description of Tagat trees. The author uses nature as a foreshadowing metaphor, where the looming fate of the town of Mebo is symbolised through a "thick band of fog" that has "spread over the river like a screen, shutting out the distant plains" (Dai 11). Nature, in Dai's works, therefore presumes the role of a character:

As he stared at it the river changed shape. Now it was like the trunk of a giant silver tree, spreading its shining arms and limbs across the body of the earth. It had crashed into the earth from the mountains, and now it wanted to hold the earth in a vast embrace. (15)

The impact of conflicts is reflected in the works of Dai and so is the change in landscape, as seen in *Escaping the Land*: All around them Lutor saw scarred mountains rearing up like ugly apparitions, as if they were wounded or angry about something (Dai 28).

Because nature carries primordial importance in postcolonial studies, the colonizer's perspective in the description of this nature becomes an interesting area for analysis:

'The first danger is the river. It is terrifying.' Then there were wild mountains and hostile tribes and the jungle teeming with wild beasts; and as if that weren't enough, there was the damp air and the swamps breeding malarial fever that killed men like flies. (Dai 58)

The above description in *The Black Hill* contrasts heavily to the one in *Escaping the Land*. In the latter, it is Lipun's firm belief that "The hills are safe!" (Dai 35). This speaks to the larger idea of nature being a saviour. Dai personifies nature in her descriptions: "moon was yet to be born" (15), and it acts as a form of shelter and safety. Nature becomes a physical manifestation of the characters' emotional turmoil, exhibited by the fact that ideas of change and peace are closely linked with the changes in the landscape. Anthony Carrigan explores this aspect in detail. He terms nature

much like race. For him, it carries a social construct, the definition of which depends to a great extent on its separation from culture. Colonialism posited economic control on this nature by controlling the resources, thus leading to the abovementioned separation. This is why native reconstruction of nature becomes integral part of decolonization.

A significant part of postcolonial criticism also involves nostalgia, manifested in these novels through ruminations on natural surroundings. Characters revive their sense of the past via dreams, visions and imaginations, a substantial portion of which includes a desire to 'return to nature'. This is specifically observed in *Escaping the Land*:

He saw himself a child again, laughing with his mother by a stream. The water was tingling cold He splashed his feet and felt all the happiness of the world seeping into his body from the bright sunshine and the lapping water. (126)

This nostalgia is a recurring motif, exhibiting an internal struggle with the changing times. In *Escaping the Land* for example, Lutor is constantly reminiscing the past as an escape from the present, where "There is only war ... " (195)

3.2.4 History, Nationality, and Tribal Identity: A Conflicted Frontier

Mamang Dai relies heavily on integrating historical facts and figures for building her narrative. In this way, she is more of a "non-objective chronicler of contemporary Northeastern reality" (Reshmi 43). For instance, she mentions in *The Black Hill* the Nanjing treaty (1842) and Tirap district's Operation Flashpoint. The fall of monarchy in France (1848) and the first Opium war (1839 — 42), too, receive a mention. This helps Dai describe history in the manner her own people experienced it, thereby unveiling the impacts of it on this specific community. Her attempt is to "be (a) part of something" (Dai 175). Using history as her foundation, Dai negates "the existence of power formations through which some subjects are marginalised and constrained, thereby determining the moves in history those subjects may articulate" (Uskalis 1).

Dai's reflections on tribal identity are closely linked with this historical basis. When we define tribal identity, it carries resemblance — concerning the Northeast — to Bhabha's 'interstitial space'. It is rather a "passage between fixed identifications" (Bhabha 4). In such a space, conglomeration between national and ethnic identities becomes all the more difficult, leading towards an inevitable identity crisis. Moreover, the double marginalization experienced at the colonial and tribal (*The Black Hill*) and the national and tribal levels (*Escaping the Land*) aggravate the 'otherness' (10) that Beauvoir talks

about in her 1949 work, *The Second Sex*. In *The Black Hill* this issue is seen prominently, as nationality, which in general is a tool against colonialism, itself presumes a colonizing role in this novel.

Bhattacharjee explores this exploitation of tribal culture as "exploitation colonialism" (Bhattacharjee 1), which is a form of "cultural dispossession" (1). "Exploitation Colonialism" refers to the control of administration over the lives of indigenous people:

The systematic demolition of cultural roots, the conflict between the traditional belief system and the modern cultural and religious institutions, and the widening gap between the individual concerns and collective demands are some of the main issues that disturbed indigenous people of all colonized societies. (Bhattacharjee 3)

There also functions a centre-state rivalry in *Escaping the Land*, which further reveals the above exploitation:

... how many letters had been sent to the PMO and the Home Ministry and the Defence Ministry appealing for help to prevent, Aohun stressed the word again, militant activity, but there had been no response — only one-liners acknowledging receipt, he said, or a line to say the matter is being looked into. (154)

It is to be noted here that through the depiction of realities such as 'exoticization', prejudice, and media corruption, Dai aptly portrays ethnic violence: "When the national papers write about us it's only hurried reports of a shoot-out or something exotic and weird" (198). Such realities lead to psychosocial disjunctions, which Dai portrays via characters that exhibit a longing for past traditions. This longing too is a crisis of identity, as seen in *Escaping the Land*:

'He's not a young child.' Jema replied. 'He should know the rules. You should know the rules.'

There were all sorts of interjections and everyone was talking at the same time — the young! The old! Tah! What are we coming to? Who gives a damn!

'Other people's sons and daughters bring gifts. They don't forget to visit their elders...' (Dai 99)

Emmanuel Eze's ideas fit this concept perfectly and reveal Dai's impact as an author:

The ideal task of the scientific historian thereby appears as heroic. On one hand, in order to be able to objectively attribute meaning to the past, the past both must and cannot be present. It is only by establishment of the boundaries of this time that

the historian is able to legitimate his or her interpretation of evidence as recovered fact ... the scientific historian ... must draw a line between brute facts ... between the two kinds of time, past and present ... (Eze 4)

Gimur ruminates in *Black Hill*, for instance: “Where do we come from? What is beyond? Sometimes she sat up with a start and cried, ‘How far, how far?’ ” (Dai 64). These lines reflect a sense of ‘misplaced’ identity.

Nonetheless, the two texts carry one specific similarity: the motif of traveling. Characters use it to trace their identity, of which journeys, explorations, and migrations become instruments. Dai, therefore, optimizes this form of writing as an assertion of her ethnic history, thereby dismantling the “tropes of colonial discourse” (Burney 188).

At the end of both novels, Dai implicitly reflects upon tribal identity’s perpetual conflict with the advancing times. Kamin’s words in *Escaping the Land* signify this exasperation:

No lights. No power. No roads, industry, nothing!
We might as well just roll over and die! So what
should we do now? We should be harder, fiercer,
and we should act! (Dai 143)

Nonetheless, Dai’s portrayal of tribal conflicts is not propagandic. She stresses heavily upon the fact that cultural reassertion too arises from this united, tribal front. In *The Black Hill*, Lendem comments: “no one wants the British to come into the hills. The elders have decided, and we, all the tribes, we are together in this. If the migluns want to use force, just let them try!” (29). Another tribesman comments — “The British may conquer the world but they will never take our land” (30).

IV. CONCLUSION

This paper, titled ‘Change, Modernity, and Northeastern Identity: A Comparative Study of Mamang Dai’s *The Black Hill* and *Escaping the Land*’, aimed at exploring the elements of change and modernity upon the sustenance of Northeastern identity in India. For this purpose, Mamang Dai’s *The Black Hill* (2014) and *Escaping The Land* (2021) were taken as texts for analysis. Both the texts carry significant depictions of the above elements as highlighted in the title. They have been analysed with the help of Postcolonial theory.

This theory helped trace the elements of identity, belongingness, ‘liminality’, nostalgia, ‘ambivalence’, and ‘hybridity’ in the texts. It helped in decoding the impact of colonial rule on tribal sovereignty and way of life. This was visible in *The Black Hill*. In *Escaping the Land*, the state of

the contemporary Northeast was chiefly analysed. How the necessity of national integration leads to a slowly degrading sense of tribal identity and heritage was the primary area for analysis. The major tenets of the postcolonial theory have been used as tools to interpret and analyse the impact of modernity and transformation on identity formation. It can be concluded that despite the changing times, condition of the Northeast has remained in a state of constant flux and instability. This is because the sustenance of tribal heritage and autonomy is marred by the domination of some or the other ‘hegemonic’ force. To sustain Northeastern heritage, it is recommended that tribal authenticity and sovereignty must be given an equal importance.

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