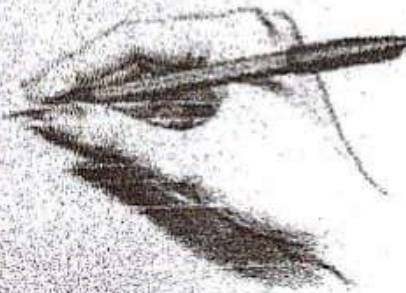


THE POSTCOLONIAL EXPERIENCE

Implications and Possibilities



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CHAPTER-10

Uncovering Lost Story: a reading of Mamang Dai's *The Black Hill*

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Abstract

Literature is most often considered a powerful medium of expression—a mode which allows one to tell one's own story. As culturally and linguistically vibrant as India is, there has sadly been a lack of proper representation of the country's regions in the periphery. Mamang Dai is an important voice of the Northeast of India whose writings are reflective of the unique culture and ethnicities of Arunachal Pradesh. *The Black Hill* is an attempt at retelling a story as well as reclaiming a past history which remains shrouded in obscurity.

Key words: History, Resistance, Story-telling

—There are many lost stories in the world and versions that were misplaced yesterday or a thousand years ago. Perhaps this is one or the other of them". (Dai ix)

Literature is often considered to be the most common vehicle of self-expression—a mode which allows one to tell one's own story. India being a land of multiple cultures and languages, multiple races and ethnicities; no wonder Mark Twain called it —. . the country of a hundred nations and a hundred tongues, of a thousand religions and two

million gods, cradle of the human race, birthplace of human speech, mother of history, grandmother of legend, great-grandmother of tradition..." (*Following the Equator*). As wonderful as it sounds, sometimes in the attempt of producing a singular, unified narrative, many smaller narratives remain unheard. Since the time of British control, writers and travellers have told stories about India, most of which are colonialist point of views: —Literary representations of colonized places did exist, but these were predominantly written by visitors or western outsiders, often as brief portraits and travel narratives, and communicated little native sense of how life actually passed in the colonies" (McLeod 450). Indian writers had indeed tried to resist such attempts by creating their own unique narratives. However, even after Independence, the borderlands or the places in the periphery (far away from the geographical mainland or the political center) of India, as yet, remains unheard or most often, misrepresented. As Lakshmi and Natarajan states: —The major literary representations in India centre on the themes and issues of urban society while the indigenous lives in the margin are shelved to be outside the limelight" (339). However, emerging writers from the Northeast of India are trying to resist, and represent and highlight the unique heritage, ethnicities and histories to the mainstream world. Mamang Dai is a celebrated writer from Arunachal Pradesh whose writings gives voice to the long-hidden stories, myths and histories which are unique to the place. Her novel *The Black Hill* is a reimaging of a crucial past history— a history which remains fragmented and untold in many respects.

It is the story of Kajinsha and Gimur— two souls representing the Mishmee and Adi tribes. Dai provides a fresh and clean outlook on these tribes who have lived for ages in the mountains of the uppermost reaches of the Northeast of India. Set in pre-independent India, at a time

when the British had set its foot in the hills and gained control over the plains of Assam Valley, the *black* already establishes the tribes' suspicions of the *migtun* (word used for the 'white man')— "Wherever the *migtun* go they bring death and outrage" (Dai 19). Gimur belongs to Mebo village— the land of the Abor community. Dai clearly states that the people never identified themselves with the term 'Abor' as it was considered derogatory: —The word Abor was not of these parts; it belonged to the plains. The word conveyed something that meant both 'barbarous' and 'independent' in Assamese, and was a term applied to all the tribes occupying the Siang valley in the mountainous country between Assam and Tibet" (Dai 26). The hill tribes have most often been mis-represented or rather under-represented and Dai reflects and points out the injustice of defining them in a single, homogenous term 'Abor'. The nomenclatures given to them either by the British or the other plains people did not do them justice. Since, very little was known about the Tribes or the communities; there was very little that was recorded. Kajinsha belonged to the Mishmee tribe and even as Dai narrates Kajinsha's origin, we get an idea of how unique their history can be:

In the 1800s what was known as the Mishmee Hills was a sparsely populated region of towering mountains and swift flowing rivers where three great clans of the Mishmee tribe lived. However, the people of Mishmee country called themselves the Kmaan, Taraan, and Idu people and the term 'Mishmee' was an alien word to them. If anyone had asked Kajinsha who he was he would have said he was Kmaan, distinct from the Taraan whom the Kmaan knew as 'Ah-wrah or Chimmu, and the Idu clans whom they called Mindow and who occupied the territories further south and northwest" (Dai 6-7).

These tribes for ages had been occupying the mountains. Conflict among the different tribal clans was

evident and most often, the conflict was for "land" and its possession. The tribes co-existed with nature and were dependent on it for their survival. Gimur was a free-spirited woman who did not understand the enmities and clashes among the clans that arose out of territorial conquests:

What is this land? Men spoke of land as a possession. From this stream to the limits of the jungle and up to that hill with the white rock is my land," they said. Every piece of earth was claimed. The big trees, the high mountains, the rivers rushing down crevasses, the steep cliffs and jagged rocks. Waterways changed course and dried up. 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. The shaman said: "The land belongs to us. It is the soul of our ancestors. Where would we be, what would we do, without this land?" (Dai 70).

For Kajinsha, land was a place of "ownership and rest" (Dai 112).

It was the land that gave them their identity.

It was clear that the tribes did not like the British presence in their territories, because it was obvious that wherever the British set foot, they would eventually bring it under their control for their own use and exploitation. So, as a natural response, they were usually hostile to the British or at least, tried to resist the intrusion of the British into their lands. Mamang Dai explains "the fierce resistance of the tribes against outsiders on account of their strong connection and obsession to their soil" (Borah 6678). The British not only occupied the lands, but also gradually imposed their religion, and language onto them which eventually changed the moral, cultural, and social fabric of the communities. Father Krick's relentless attempts to reach Tibet is what complicates the already tense situation.

Although he was completely devoid of any motivation, yet the Chinese authorities in Tibet keen on welcoming any Christian missionary. Krick's indefatigable missionary zeal to spread the word of God is met with resistance and questions the colonialist enterprise of spreading Christianity and establishing it as a superior religion. The tribes believed in nature and animism and it was as good as any other religion as in Kajinsha's words:

The Tibetan lamas have books and you read your book for knowledge of God. 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 voices of spirits telling us something. It is how we have learnt 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).

Kajinsha is falsely implicated in the murder of Father Krick. And he had no evidence of proving himself innocent. While in jail, Kajinsha had told Gimur: "Tell them we were good. Tell them we also had some things to say. But we cannot read and write. So we tell stories" (Dai 288). In a way, Kajinsha and Gimur's story is Dai's attempt at telling an alternate story—one which deflects from the "official" story.

In *The Black Hill*, Mamang Dai tries to uncover and retell a story—a story which was unrecorded and hence, not known or heard. It is a subtle fight between recorded events and unrecorded ones. Lamarque had said, "Stories don't just exist, they are told, and not just told but told from some perspective or other" (131). Dai makes a deliberate attempt here to retrace the events of history and dig up and recreate a story which might have never been told or heard. "I have books in front of me. They tell me things about this

land, and a priest who walked across these hills carrying a cross and a sextant. They tell me what he saw and thought, but these are words fixed on yellowed paper. There is another story from an unwritten past hidden beyond the mountain wall" (Dai ix). It is this life beyond the mountain wall, the life of Kajinsha and Gimur, and how their lives are forever changed and destroyed by one man's relentless efforts to reach Tibet—this life is what Dai tells.

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