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Postcolonial Environment and Ecofeminist Resistance: Reading Mamang Dai's River Poems

Km. Nishtha[1] & Prof. Rani Tiwari[2]
[1]Research Scholar English, S.S.V. (P.G.) College, Hapur, U.P. Affiliated to C.C.S. University, Meerut, U.P.
[2]Dept. of English, S.S.V. (P.G.) College, Hapur, U.P. Affiliated to C.C.S. University, Meerut, U.P. India

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Abstract

Mamang Dai's poetry emerges from the ecological, cultural, and political landscapes of Arunachal Pradesh, a region marked by biodiversity as well as postcolonial marginalisation. While Dai's poems are deeply rooted in images of rivers, mountains, forests, and rain, they do not function merely as lyric celebrations of nature. Instead, they engage critically with questions of ecological loss, indigenous identity, political violence, and gendered forms of domination. This paper examines three poems from Dai's *River Poems*—"Small Towns and the River," "An Obscure Place," and "The Voice of the Mountain"—through the combined frameworks of postcolonial ecocriticism and ecofeminism. The paper argues that Dai reimagines nature as an animate, speaking presence that resists colonial, capitalist, and patriarchal modes of control. Through close readings, the paper demonstrates how rivers and mountains become repositories of memory, witnesses to violence, and symbols of female resilience. Ultimately, Dai's poetry articulates an ecological ethic that links environmental justice with cultural survival and women's agency in postcolonial India.

Keywords: Postcolonial ecology, ecofeminism, Mamang Dai, North-East poetry, nature and gender

Introduction

Ecocriticism is the study of literature with regard to environment. The term Ecocriticism was first coined by William Ruckert in his critical writing *Literature and Ecology: An Experiment in Ecocriticism*. The eminent writer Raymond Williams in his work *The Country and the City* elegantly argued and showed how English literature contributed to certain specific notion of nature, i.e. "the country side poverty"[1], seasons and the City, as was often noticed in the works of the Romantics too. Williams was not trying to explore the environmental aspects of eighteenth century rather, he was trying to demonstrate how the age worked with particular notion of nature and culture, thereby nature to culture and literature for ages that would follow. Ecocriticism is influenced by insights from philosophy, development studies in sociology, ecology, feminism and other disciplines and approaches.

Arne Naess was a Norwegian philosopher who coined the term "deep ecology"[2] and was an important intellectual and inspirational figure within the environmental movement of late twentieth century. Arne Naess formulated these key concerns of his philosophy. His major ideas are as follows.

1. Present human interference with non-human world is excessive and the situation is rapidly worsening.
2. Richness and diversity of life forms contribute to the realization of these values and also value in themselves.
3. Humans have no right to reduce this richness and diversity except to satisfy vital human needs.

Man's anthropocentric attitude of dominating nature led us towards eco-disasters. A young revisionist movement called Ecocriticism has emerged recently in literary theory in which contemporary concerns of environmental crisis are related to corresponding literary studies and scrutinized. This new theory of nature writing explores the relationship between humans and natural world and the way they interact, influence and counter each other.

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Mamang Dai and the Poetics of Landscape

Mamang Dai occupies a distinctive position within Indian English poetry, particularly in the context of writing from North-East India. Born in Pasighat, Arunachal Pradesh, and belonging to the Adi community, Dai's literary imagination is shaped by indigenous worldviews, oral traditions, and the ecological specificity of the eastern Himalayas. Her education in English literature, combined with her work as a journalist and her professional association with the World Wide Fund for Nature during its early years in the state, has enabled her to engage with both global discourses and local realities. Dai's writing consistently negotiates the intersections of environment, culture, memory, and politics.

River Poems (2004) is one of Dai's most evocative poetic works, where rivers and mountains recur not only as natural features but as metaphors for time, continuity, and survival. The poems are deeply embedded in the lived experiences of a region that has often remained peripheral within national narratives of postcolonial India. As she herself has noted, her poetry is informed by tribal myths, oral narratives, and a sustained engagement with the land: "I am the place where memory escapes/the myth of time,/I am the sleep in the mind of the mountain."[3] This intimate relationship between landscape and memory becomes central to her poetic vision.

This paper examines three poems from *River Poems*—"Small Towns and the River," "An Obscure Place," and "The Voice of the Mountain"—to explore how Dai's nature poetry functions as a form of postcolonial ecological resistance. By employing ecofeminist and postcolonial ecocritical frameworks, the paper argues that Dai's poems challenge dominant narratives that separate nature from culture and women from agency. Instead, they present an alternative epistemology in which land, history, and gender are deeply interconnected.

Theoretical Framework: Postcolonial Ecocriticism and Ecofeminism

Ecocriticism, as a literary approach, examines the relationship between literature and the physical environment, questioning anthropocentric and exploitative attitudes toward nature. In postcolonial contexts, ecocriticism acquires an additional political dimension, as environmental degradation is often intertwined with colonial histories and capitalist expansion. Graham Huggan and Helen Tiffin argue that postcolonial ecocriticism must attend to "the material consequences of colonialism on environments and indigenous lifeworlds."[4]

Ecofeminism further extends this critique by foregrounding the structural parallels between the domination of nature and the oppression of women. Vandana Shiva contends that capitalist patriarchy treats both women and nature as passive resources to be controlled and exploited[5], erasing indigenous and feminine knowledge systems in the process. Similarly, Val Plumwood identifies a "logic of domination"[6] that sustains hierarchical binaries such as man/woman and culture/nature, legitimising violence against both women and the environment.

Carolyn Merchant's concept of nature as a historically gendered entity is particularly useful for reading Dai's poetry. Merchant demonstrates how premodern organic views of nature were replaced by mechanistic models during colonial modernity, leading to ecological and cultural alienation.[7] Dai's poems, with their animistic and myth-inflected landscapes, resist this mechanistic worldview by restoring agency and voice to rivers and mountains.

Within North-East Indian poetry, ecocriticism intersects with concerns of political violence, insurgency, and cultural erasure. As editors Robin S. Ngangom and Kynpham S. Nongkynrih observe, poets from the region often write under the shadow of conflict, where "the menace of the gun" makes poetry an act of

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witnessing rather than aesthetic escapism.[8] Dai's ecofeminist vision emerges precisely from this space of witnessing, where nature bears the scars of both colonial exploitation and postcolonial unrest.

"Small Towns and the River": Ecology, Ritual, and Feminine Continuity

"Small Towns and the River" foregrounds an intimate and deeply layered relationship between human life, death, ritual, and the natural world. The poem opens with the stark assertion, "Small towns always remind me of death"[9] immediately situating mortality as a defining feature of everyday existence. However, death here is not presented as an end point; instead, it is woven into cyclical rhythms sustained by ritual and nature. The refrain "Life and death, life and death, / only the rituals are permanent" (Dai) underscores continuity rather than finality, suggesting that communal practices offer stability amid historical and ecological uncertainty.

Central to this continuity is the river, which functions as both a geographical presence and a cultural axis. Dai's repeated insistence that "The river has a soul" (Dai) challenges modern, utilitarian conceptions of nature and restores to it an animate, ethical presence. The river becomes a bearer of memory and a witness to generational life, "knowing / the immortality of water" (Dai). Vandana Shiva argues that such worldviews resist colonial epistemologies that reduce nature to inert matter.[10] Dai's river, positioned as a custodian of ecological memory, aligns with indigenous epistemologies in which nature is not external to human life but integral to it. The river's journey—from the mountains through small towns and onward—symbolically mirrors the cultural journey of the people who live along its banks.

The poem implicitly refers to the river Siang, which flows past Dai's hometown of Pasighat in Arunachal Pradesh. Originating as the Tsangpo in Tibet and later becoming the Brahmaputra, the river's transformation across regions mirrors the layered histories and identities of the land it traverses. For the Adi community, the river is sacred, believed to possess healing powers and spiritual significance. Dai's depiction of the river thus draws upon lived cultural belief rather than abstract symbolism, grounding the poem in local cosmology and tribal memory.

Ritual imagery deepens this connection between ecology and belief. The placement of the dead "pointing west"(Dai) so that the soul may walk into the "golden east"(Dai) and "the house of the sun" (Dai) reflects indigenous funerary practices rooted in solar symbolism and mythic geography. Arunachal Pradesh, often described as the "Land of the Dawn-Lit Mountains," receives the first rays of the sun in India, and this imagery reinforces the poem's orientation toward renewal rather than closure. Death, like the river, becomes a passage rather than a terminus.

Gendered symbolism operates subtly but powerfully throughout the poem. The domestic scale of small towns, the communal rituals of mourning, and the nurturing yet forceful presence of the river evoke associations traditionally aligned with femininity. Yet the river is not passive or gentle alone; it "cuts through the land / like a torrent of grief" (Dai), embodying both endurance and resistance. This duality resists idealised representations of feminine nature and instead presents a resilient, grieving, and active ecological force. The river's suffering parallels the suffering of the community, suggesting that ecological erosion and social trauma are deeply intertwined.

The poem also expresses anxiety about the future of small towns and their traditions. While rituals endure, they do so under threat from modernisation, urbanisation, and ecological degradation. The poet's lament is not nostalgic but urgent, reflecting a fear that cultural memory and indigenous practices may be eroded alongside the land itself. The river, as a recurring leitmotif, becomes a site where identity is both preserved and endangered.

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Ecological degradation emerges as a crucial undercurrent in the poem. The image of the river "holding its breath / seeking a land of fish and stars"(Dai) suggests depletion, loss of biodiversity, and a longing for a purer, mythic past. This ecological distress mirrors the cultural erosion experienced by tribal communities facing insurgency and developmental intrusion. The damage is not only physical but spiritual, affecting the delicate balance between humans, rituals, and the environment.

As an environmentally conscious poet, Dai presents nature as sacred and sentient—rocks, rivers, and mountains are alive and responsive. The river's pain reflects human violence and unrest, particularly in a region marked by political instability. Summer, associated with grief and drought, becomes a metaphor for periods of conflict, when both land and people suffer. The erosion described is thus ecological, cultural, and ethical.

The poem concludes with a yearning for transcendence: "In small towns by the river / we all want to walk with the gods" (Dai). Spiritual aspiration here arises not from institutional religion but from ecological belonging and ancestral memory. To "walk with the gods"(Dai) is to live in harmony with land, ritual, and tradition. In this sense, the river is not merely a natural feature but a life force that sustains identity, belief, and continuity. Dai's poem ultimately affirms that the survival of small towns, their cultures, and their people is inseparable from the survival of the river that flows through them.

"An Obscure Place": Silence, Violence, and Postcolonial Marginality

"An Obscure Place" directly addresses the historical and political marginalisation of Arunachal Pradesh. The poem's insistence on uncertainty "Nothing is certain",[11] reflects the fragile status of indigenous histories in postcolonial India. Language loss emerges as a central concern, echoing Dai's observation that few speakers remain of the original literary languages of the region. She said, "Because I write in English and have to translate, in my head, from my mother tongue into English, I feel it is only fair that this should be as wide, representative and as true as possible."[12]

The poem's repeated invocation of mountains and rivers situates human history within a larger ecological continuum. However, this continuity is disrupted by violence: "If there is no death the news is silent" (Dai). Insurgency and militarisation haunt the landscape, turning villages into "sleeping houses" (Dai) and communities into stone. Ngangom and Nongkynrih's assertion that North-East poetry functions as testimony is evident here, as Dai records violence without sensationalism.[13]

Ecofeminist themes surface in the silencing of women: "Yesterday the women hid their faces. / They forbade their children to speak" (Dai). This enforced silence parallels the muting of the land itself, both subjected to external forces symbolised by "the words of strangers" (Dai). Val Plumwood's concept of domination is useful here, as the poem exposes how colonial and nationalist discourses erase local voices.[14]

Yet the poem does not surrender to despair. The repeated refrain—"There are mountains. Oh! There are mountains." (Dai) asserts ecological permanence amid political instability. The mountains function as repositories of cultural memory, offering a form of resistance grounded in place. The poem's refusal to "speak of victory yet" (Dai) underscores a cautious hope rooted in survival rather than triumph.

"The Voice of the Mountain": Speaking Nature and Feminine Survival

"The Voice of the Mountain" radicalises Dai's ecological vision by allowing the mountain itself to speak. The poetic voice shifts fluidly across identities "old man", "child", "woman", "warrior"(Dai)suggesting a collective, non-human subjectivity. This multiplicity challenges anthropocentric notions of voice and aligns with ecofeminist calls to recognise non-human agency.[15]

The mountain's voice encompasses history, myth, and ecological time: "In my life I have lived many lives" (Dai). Such temporality resists linear, colonial histories and affirms indigenous cyclical understandings of existence. The mountain's knowledge is embodied and affective, "burning in the sun's embrace" (Dai), reinforcing a sensory relationship with the environment.

The poem explicitly connects violence and ecological endurance: "Peace is a falsity. / A moment of rest comes after long combat" (Dai). This acknowledgement of conflict resonates with postcolonial realities, yet the poem insists on survival through adaptation. The line "I am the woman lost in translation / who survives" (Dai) is particularly significant, foregrounding female resilience amid cultural dislocation. Ecofeminism here is not merely symbolic but political, asserting women's capacity to endure and regenerate.

Ultimately, the mountain declares itself "the place where memory escapes / the myth of time" (Dai). Memory becomes ecological, resisting erasure through its embeddedness in land. Dai's poetry refuses easy conclusions, offering instead quiet resistance. She says, "Poetry is the voice of protest, and it is the voice of love."[16]

Conclusion

Mamang Dai's *River Poems* articulate a powerful ecological and feminist vision rooted in the landscapes of Arunachal Pradesh. Through rivers and mountains, Dai reimagines nature as a living archive of memory, history, and resistance. The poems examined in this paper demonstrate how postcolonial ecocriticism and ecofeminism together illuminate the political dimensions of Dai's nature imagery. By linking environmental degradation with cultural erasure and gendered oppression, Dai challenges dominant narratives of development and nationhood.

Her poetry ultimately calls for an ethics of care grounded in indigenous knowledge, ecological balance, and female agency. In giving voice to rivers and mountains, Dai also restores voice to marginalised communities and women, affirming their place within the postcolonial environmental imagination of India.

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