

# *Hill The Black* by Mamang Dai: A Study of the Contemporary Context of Identity, Environment and Indigenous Rights

By Dr AMRITA EKKA

Rajendra University Balangir, Odisha, India

Indigenous literature is an essential resource for understanding issues of identity, ecology, memory and human rights. Mamang Dai's *The Black Hill* (2014) is an important addition to this discussion, as it uses an Indigenous centred narrative to illustrate the historical and cultural realities of Northeast India. The novel deals with the relationship between land, community, spirituality and political change in the socio-cultural context of Arunachal Pradesh and the eastern Himalayan region. This essay situates *The Black Hill* within the contemporary debate over Indigenous identity, environmental catastrophe and rights-based discourse. The paper argues that Dai's novel challenges dominant national and colonial histories by foregrounding local histories and ecological knowledge systems, through postcolonial, ecocritical, and indigenous theoretical lenses. The article then proceeds to discuss nature in the book as a living repository of cultural memory and moral principles, rather than just background scenery. *The Black Hill* speaks again in this era of relocation, cultural homogenization, climate change and struggles for Indigenous recognition. Its depictions of the land, oral traditions, and history of engagement contribute to larger conversations about environmental justice, cultural survival, and Indigenous self-representation. This study exemplifies a literary intervention of Mamang Dai that pushes the boundaries of regional storytelling within global discourses on sustainability, identity politics and indigenous rights.

Keywords: - *The Black Hill*, Indigenous literature, human rights, Northeast India, identity, environment, ecocriticism, cultural memory, postcolonial studies.

## Introduction

The emergence of marginalized and regional voices has radically transformed Indian English literature, challenging the hegemony of urban literary narratives. Recently, Northeast Indian literature has attracted scholarly attention, as it engages with issues such as ethnicity, land, conflict, memory, and cultural survival. Mamang Dai is a leading contemporary writer who has depicted the ecological and historical backdrop of the tribal communities of Arunachal Pradesh in her writings. *The Black Hill* occupies a special place in Dai's oeuvre. The work presents a multi-layered narrative that extends beyond linear storytelling and is influenced by oral memory, colonial encounters, tribal cosmology and environmental concern. Dai presents a world in which land is not a commercial resource but a source of community identity, spirituality and belonging through historical shifts and interwoven lives (Dai, 2014).

*The Black Hill* addresses global issues and resonates today. The 21st century has been defined by escalating climate change, ecological degradation, extractive development, forced migration and ongoing struggles for Indigenous rights. Globally, Indigenous peoples are facing increasing pressures from capitalist forms of development and the erosion of traditional knowledge systems (United Nations, 2021). Many Indigenous peoples of India continue to face issues of cultural autonomy, territorial rights, and displacement due to environmental degradation.

In this regard, Dai's book extends beyond local history. It provides a different epistemology of the link between humans, environment and cultural identity, rather than seeing them as separate things. The mountain, forest, and river scenes in the novel are symbolic of social memory and moral obligation. This position correlates with the

ecocritical approach to the need for a redefinition of the anthropocentric views of nature (Glotfelty and Fromm, 1996). *The Black Hill* also contributes to the postcolonial literary debate by subverting fixed notions of Indian identity. The book's narratives of life in the borderlands, of Indigenous historical consciousness, and of the collision of local and external systems of governance reveal the complexities of these issues. Dai's work contributes to the literary debates on cultural diversity, sovereignty and belonging (Ngangom and Misra, 2008). This article considers *The Black Hill* through the contemporary lenses of identity, environmental ethics and Indigenous rights. This study employs postcolonial and ecocritical approaches to demonstrate how the novel preserves local memory and provides vital insight into contemporary discussions of social justice, sustainability, and cultural survival.

### Study's Objectives

- to study the representation of the indigenous identity and cultural memory in Mamang Dai's *The Black Hill*. Think about the relationships between environment, landscape and community in the context of ecocritical literary studies.
- The study aims to explore the novel's relevance to current debates on cultural preservation, displacement, and Indigenous rights.
- to explore how Dai draws on Indigenous epistemology and regional storytelling to subvert colonial and dominant national discourses.
- to evaluate *The Black Hill*'s relevance to the broader conversation about human rights, ecological justice and the climate emergency.

### Methodology

The twenty-first century has witnessed an intensification of climate change, ecological degradation, extractive development, forced migration, and the continuing struggle for Indigenous rights. The core of the study is a close reading of Mamang Dai's *The Black Hill*. This is followed by an interpretive exploration of the interrelated dimensions of identity, ecology and rights discourse through the lens of postcolonial theory, ecocriticism and Indigenous knowledge.

Postcolonial theory provides a useful lens through which to examine how the power relations of colonialism affect the representation of culture, geography and historical memory. Academic figures such as Homi K. Bhabha, Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak and Edward Said have shown how communities in the margins negotiate their identity under systems of dominance (Said, 1978; Bhabha, 1994). Their theoretical insights contribute to the novel's exploration of colonial encounters and Indigenous representation. *The Black Hill* is treated as a case study of the environmental imagination from the point of view of the ecocritical methodology. Ecocriticism explores the relationship between literature and the natural world as a means of illustrating how literary texts embody ecological ideals and environmental ethics (Glotfelty and Fromm, 1996). This is especially relevant when examining Dai's representation of land as a living and culturally embedded entity. The study also incorporates Indigenous studies scholarship in its interpretation of issues of community, oral tradition, ancestral memory and cultural rights. The conversation occurs in the context of academic journal articles, books, critical essays and studies on environmental justice and Indigenous rights. It is an interpretive rather than an empirical method and its main concerns are engagement with theory, thematic analysis and textual meaning.

### Review of Review

Critical scholarship on Mamang Dai has increased substantially over the last decade particularly in the areas of Indigenous writing, ecocriticism and Northeast Indian literature. Scholars have recognised Dai's work as an important intervention in conversations around memory and the environment. and also identity.

“Landscape in Dai literature” is a hot research topic. Dai’s writing, critics argue, does not treat natural space as a descriptive background, but as a storehouse of cultural information and spiritual imagination. Dai’s literary imagination is closely connected to tribal cosmology and communal life (Dai, 2006). These readings provide support for ecocritical arguments that literature can counter exploitative dispositions towards the environment by drawing attention to ecological interdependence (Buell, 1995).

Northeast Indian literature in particular has also drawn attention to the difficulties of retrieving repressed histories and alternative cultural narratives. According to Ngangom and Misra (2008), the literature of the region communicates experiences that are shaped by ethnicity, border politics and historical marginality, thus defying conventional literary frameworks. In this context, Dai’s literature is a powerful expression of Indigenous worldviews. viewpoints.

Scholarly studies of Indigenous identity place great value on ancestral memory, oral tradition and storytelling. (Smith, 2012) asserts that indigenous literary works serve as a tool for cultural preservation and resistance to the loss of knowledge. This tendency is expressed in *The Black Hill*’s focus on narrative systems of inherited knowledge and collective memory. The novel’s use of oral tradition and local histories illustrates what many Indigenous scholars call narrative sovereignty, the ability of communities to tell stories in the way they choose. Another significant body of research concerns postcolonial representations of space and power. As postcolonial theorists argue, colonial systems produce hierarchical notions of civilization, geography and culture (Said, 1978). The landscape is often a site of political and cultural contestation in the literatures of colonized or marginalized geographies. It is therefore possible to locate Dai’s work on frontier histories, missionary presence and colonial encounters within wider postcolonial discourses on representation and power.

Many Indigenous works question and critique contemporary capitalist ideas of environmental exploitation, and ecocritical scholarship has become more and more important to the study of Indigenous literature. As Garrard (2012) and other academics argue, literary responses to ecological crises must consider Indigenous ecological knowledge and non-anthropocentric ethical systems. *The Black Hill*’s depiction of positive relationships between human societies and the natural environment is an important addition to this conversation.

Although Mamang Dai studies are on the rise, there is relatively little in-depth research connecting *The Black Hill* to contemporary debates on environmental justice, Indigenous rights and the global ecological catastrophe. Much criticism has been leveled at the novel for its literary aesthetics and its portrayal of local customs, but its broader relevance to the current debate over human rights has not yet been fully explored. In the present study, I try to fill this gap by situating the novel within contemporary debates on identity politics, environmental ethics, and Indigenous self-determination.

### ***The Black Hill: An Indigenous Place of Memory and Identity***

*The Black Hill* engages with one of the main themes of indigenous identity, namely the articulation of identity through cultural memory, ancestral knowledge and lived interactions with land. Mamang Dai’s notion of identity is not a single one but a shared one built on oral history, kinship, ecology and inherited customs. The book challenges centralized nationalism, homogeneous cultural frameworks and dominant ideas of identity. Rather, it offers a perspective based on the historical experience of Northeast Indian Indigenous peoples.

Indigenous identity issues are still topical today. Globalization, urbanization, extractive industries and cultural assimilation threaten indigenous cultures worldwide. In many communities in India, migration, modernity and political marginalisation are being fought. *The Black Hill* addresses these issues by representing identity as inseparably linked to memory and place.

The narrative structure follows the conventions of oral storytelling. The book employs more than linear chronology, also fractured encounters, recalled history, and multiple voices. This is akin to the Indigenous oral epistemologies that use community engagement, ritual memory and narration to communicate knowledge. Such

narrative techniques contest Western forms of historiography that privilege written records over oral archives (Smith, 2012).

Memory is a form of resistance throughout the book. Local histories, ancestral customs and behaviors, and remembered landscapes can allow communities to hold onto cultural continuity in the wake of erasure. Cultural memory is politically important because it preserves ways of knowing and being that are alternatives. Hence, Dai's portrait is a manifestation of postcolonial study that seeks to recover the histories of the dispossessed that were silenced in colonial narratives (Said, 1978).

It also challenges easy dichotomies between modernity and tradition. Indigenous identity is not fixed or divorced from *The Black Hill's* change. Instead, Dai recognizes the fluid negotiations of social change, colonial engagement and political transformation. This complex representation is particularly pertinent to current conversations about Indigenous self-definition and cultural adaptability.

The image is significant not only for local literature. The indigenous self-representation has become a major issue in the current discourse on human rights and literature. In academia there is a growing argument that Indigenous communities should not be seen as objects of anthropological observation, but as intellectual and cultural agents who are able to tell their own stories (Tuhivai Smith, 2012). Mamang Dai's book is an example of a broader trend that places Indigenous voices and epistemologies at the center.

#### Landscape, Environmental Awareness and Ecology

What is perhaps most striking about *Black Hill* is its ecological imagination. In the book, nature is not merely a passive background or beautiful description. Rivers, valleys, mountains and woods all act as living beings, intimately linked to social connection, spirituality and human consciousness. The environment is a memory agent. Ecocritical theory offers a useful base for understanding this aspect of the novel. Ecocriticism challenges the anthropocentric view of nature as a resource for human exploitation and explores the link between literature and the natural world (Glotfelty and Fromm, 1996). Dai's book emphasizes ecological connection rather than human dominance of nature, placing it well within ecocritical perspectives.

The terrain of *Black Hill* is a cultural repository. The land is the knowledge of the cosmos, of ethical principles, of the memory of the ancestors. Hence the collective identity is attached to the environment. Such a world view is in stark contrast to the concepts of capitalist growth that commodify natural resources in order to exploit them economically.

The distinction is ever more pertinent to contemporary discussions on climate change and environmental degradation. Indigenous territory is under threat globally from mining expansion, deforestation, industrial extraction and ecological displacement. Environmental damage often leads to cultural loss, as traditional ecological knowledge systems rely on ongoing relations to land (United Nations, 2021).

Dai's book gently criticizes the ways of exploiting nature through ecological interactions of reciprocity and accountability. The book advocates that humans should work with nature, not against it, to keep the environment in balance to ensure survival. This perspective is very much aligned with Indigenous environmental ethics worldwide.

Also worth considering is the metaphorical meaning of the "black hill" itself. The hill can be imagined as a metaphorical environment, with enduring, mysterious, continuous and communal memories, as well as a physical site. It is a testament to the resilience of ecological and cultural memory in the face of political change and outside influence.

Viewed today, *The Black Hill* is a direct response to the environmental disasters of our time. Resource conflicts, loss of biodiversity and climatic instability are growing challenges for global societies. Dai's literary works are important for presenting alternative ecological ideologies that emphasize interdependence rather than extraction. The book moves conversations about sustainability and ecological justice substantially forward by foregrounding Indigenous environmental consciousness.

The book also questions modern notions of human exceptionalism. Ecocritical scholarship has noted that the ideological systems that separate humans from nature contribute to the environmental crises (Garrard, 2012). Dai challenges this division by claiming that human existence is interwoven with natural networks.

#### From Human Rights to Colonial Encounter and Indigenous Rights

*The Black Hill* can also be discussed in terms of human rights, and the rights of Indigenous peoples. The book deals with colonial encounters, frontier management, missionary impact and political change in historical

accounts. Rather than as objective historical processes, these interactions are presented as affecting social structures, cultural perspectives, and authority structures.

The colonial power constructed hierarchical notions of geography, civilization, and cultural legitimacy. The political peripheries were frequently described as uncivilized, backward or administratively problematic. Two examples of postcolonial theorists who have shown how these representations operated within larger regimes of imperial domination are Bhabha (1994) and Said (1978) (Bhabha, 1994; Said, 1978).

Local realities for Indigenous peoples on *The Black Hill* are subject to external forces that seek to classify, define or control them. Dai's story upends such frames by foregrounding Indigenous perspectives. This storytelling technique is politically significant because the act of storytelling itself may be decolonizing.

Today's Indigenous rights discourse focuses on land rights, cultural autonomy, language preservation and self-determination. The United Nations Declaration on the Rights of Indigenous Peoples (United Nations, 2007) recognizes the importance of protecting Indigenous traditions, institutions and territorial connections. Many of these themes are similar to issues raised in Dai's book.

The land question is still very important. For many Indigenous peoples, land is often more than just a real estate. It has history, spirituality, livelihood and togetherness. Displacement from ancestral landscapes thus signifies not only financial loss but also cultural and psychological disturbance.

Talks around development projects, mining, forest governance and territorial rights still hold relevance for the Indigenous community in modern India. Literature can help these conversations by humanizing what is often reduced to administrative categories or policy vocabulary. *The Black Hill* tries to do this by emphasizing the cultural and emotional aspects of community-land relations. The work also speaks to bigger conversations around representational justice. The perspectives of outsiders have historically marginalised, exoticised or romanticised the experiences of indigenous peoples. Dai writes stories drawing on local knowledge and cultural familiarity in order to counter this trend. *The Black Hill* challenges the reader's assumptions about civilization, progress and governance from the standpoint of human rights. *The Black Hill* brings up important ethical questions about preserving history, validating voices and protecting connections to land.

### **The Importance of *The Black Hill* Today's Concept**

*Black Hill* is not just a literary work in the modern period. It tackles head on a range of pressing twenty-first century themes, including identity politics, cultural homogenization, environmental destruction and Indigenous dispossession.

Two significant areas of concern are globalization and the survival of culture. Rapid cultural change is occurring in modern cultures, due to a number of variables, such as migration, consumer capitalism, transnational communication networks, and technological breakthroughs. Globalization opens new channels of communication but it also can lead to linguistic degradation, cultural commodification and disappearance of old knowledge systems.

In addressing these concerns, Dai's book returns to the significance of cultural memory and localized knowledge. The essay argues that we must maintain ethical relationships to history, ecology and community in order to connect meaningfully with modernity, not idealize isolation.

This book also has relevance for today's environmental debates. Global concern about climate change has highlighted Indigenous systems of ecological knowledge by drawing attention to long histories of environmental stewardship among many Indigenous peoples. Academia and policy organizations increasingly recognize indigenous engagement and territorial protection as integral to ecological sustainability (United Nations, 2021). *The Black Hill* contributes to this discussion by demonstrating ecological knowledge embedded in everyday cultural behaviors, not in abstract environmental theory. Hence, the book features thought-provoking reflections on the various types of environmental cohabitation.

The book also addresses ongoing discussions on regional marginalization and border politics. The history of Northeast India's place in the political consciousness of the country is a complicated one. Regional literature is usually concerned with issues of visibility, belonging and representational inequity (Ngangom and Misra, 2008). By making regional histories more accessible to both the academic and public readership, Dai's book helps to address the problem of literary and cultural invisibility.

Last but not least, *The Black Hill* is still relevant because it points to the moral value of listening to the marginalised knowledge systems. The book reminds us that in a moment of ecological unpredictability, political division and cultural scattering, sustainable futures need to incorporate memory, reciprocity and multiple ways of seeing the world.

## Conclusion

Mamang Dai's *The Black Hill* is a book especially pertinent to today's discussions of identity, the environment and Indigenous rights. Through the representation of landscape, memory, oral tradition and historical contact, the novel subverts dominant narratives that denigrate Indigenous experiences and systems of ecological knowledge. As the study argues, the novel uses those interconnected links of community, ancestry, storytelling, and land to construct the identity of the Indigenous people. The book demands diverse, regional and historically informed ideas of belonging and refuses one-size-fits-all definitions of culture.

*The Black Hill* is also relevant today for its ecology. By presenting nature as sentient and moral, rather than as a passive resource, Dai provides a powerful critique of anthropocentric development paradigms and extractive modernity. Such literary perspectives become vitally relevant in the age of environmental degradation and climate crisis.

The novel also speaks to broader conversations about Indigenous rights and human rights discourse through its engagement with colonial encounter, representation and cultural autonomy. Dai's book is significant in the fight for justice and recognition, for the importance of self-representation, territorial belonging and historical memory. Ultimately, *The Black Hill* is a regional novel of Northeast India, but it is also a literary intervention that speaks to a global readership, engaging with some of the most urgent ethical and political issues of the modern world.

## Bibliography

Bhabha, H.K. (1994). *The Location of Culture*. London: Routledge

Buell, L., 1995. *The Environmental Imagination: Thoreau, Nature Writing and the Development of American Culture*. Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press.

Dai, M. (2006). *The Legend Pensam*. Penguin Books. New Delhi.

Dai, M. (2014). *The Hill of Black*. Aleph Book Company, New Delhi.

Garrard, G., 2012. *Ecocriticism*. 2nd edition. London: Routledge.

Glotfelty, C. and Fromm, H. (eds.), 1996. *Landmarks in Literary Ecology: The Ecocriticism Reader* University of Georgia Press, Athens.

Ngangom, R. and Misra, T. (eds.), 2008. *The Oxford Anthology of North-East Indian Literature*. New Delhi: Oxford University Press.

E. W. Said, 1978. *Orientalism*. New York: Pantheon Books.

Smith, L.T., 2012. *Decolonizing Methodologies: Indigenous Peoples and Research*. 2nd edition. London: Zed Books.

United Nations, 2007. *United Nations Declaration on the Rights of Indigenous Peoples*. New York: United Nations.

UN, 2021. *Indigenous Peoples of the World Rights to Resources, Territories and Territories*, New York : United Nations.



**Copyright & License:**

© Authors retain the copyright of this article. This work is published under the Creative Commons Attribution 4.0 International License (CC BY 4.0), permitting unrestricted use, distribution, and reproduction in any medium, provided the original work is properly cited.