

# Acts Of Memory In Postcolonial Literature: A Study Of Mamang Dai's Poems from River Poems (2004)

BHAVIKA SACHAN<sup>1</sup>

<sup>1</sup>M.A. English, University of Delhi

## Abstract

The way memory works can be painful or restorative but always a dynamic process of seeking, re-collecting and re-making. Memories act as cultural repositories and play a significant role in identity construction. What we are and know depends on what we remember, and the past is often revisited and re-imagined to suit the present context. In her poems, Mamang Dai creates a counter-memory of Arunachal Pradesh against India's official memory and advocates for an ethnic attachment to ecology, myths and oral narratives of the past. This essay explores the significance of memory, its types and functions, notes Mamang Dai's descent into the depths of historical memory to excavate individual voices, and explore collective memories and cultural traumas. This paper uses the methods and theories of memory studies to investigate the complex relation between memory and postcolonial literature while analysing and interpreting the multi-layered deployment of memory in Mamang Dai's poems from her poetry collection, River Poems (2004).

*Keywords: collective, counter-memory, identity, myth, oral narratives, postcolonial*

## 1. Introduction: Memory, Its Types and Functions

The interest in memory and memory studies, both within academia and the wider culture, has increased since the early 1980s at an unprecedented velocity. Memory, it seems, is omnipresent: researchers, authors and poets are equally obsessed with the processes, products and consequences of memory. John R. Gillis suggestively calls memory a “free-floating, subjective phenomenon” (2005, p.3) whose depths still remain unfathomable.

Our minds stand imaginatively ungauged and, hence, hold innumerable possibilities and remembrances. Mind offers a limitless space for inquiry into the psyche of man, and as such, psychologists, theorists and academicians are devoted to the dissemination of imagination's and memory's personal, "[...] social, political and cultural relevance" (Assmann, 1999, p.16). 'The Persistence of Memory' (1931), a surrealist painting by Salvador Dali is one of the many representations<sup>1</sup> of what Andreas Huyssen marks as the contemporary memory "boom" that bespeak "the late modernity's equivocations and ambivalences concerning truth, embodiment, location and the temporality of hope - equivocations that had their source in the disruptions and discontinuities of post-revolutionary, urban society, whose force deepened under the impact of the holocaust and which are now being worked through in the context of late modern technologies and temporalities" (1995, p.5). Virginia Woolf<sup>2</sup>, too deconstructs the present-past binary as unilateral/one-directional and presents the inadequacy of clock (mechanical) time to measure human experiences as she stretches and collapses time through the metaphor of a 'stream' erratically carrying man's consciousness away, plunging for a deeper exploration of his hidden and/or latent self: psychological as well as historical.

There is the sense of a "post-histoire" (Assmann, 1992, p.5), which is a time period beyond recorded history - the idea of historical consciousness and the resulting insecurity about how to narrate the lost, unspoken and repressed past(s). Peter Burke remarks, to the point, that "neither memories nor histories seem objective any longer" (1989, p. 98). The reliability of both memory and historical truth has come into question with the rise of modernity, emerging ideas of individualism, bleak prospects of industrialism and the world wars fought at the expense of human lives. History is no longer singular but plural, just as there is no one absolute truth but multiple truths, multiple stories and a deep, unorganised 'swamp' of mind: the place where memories come to rest. 'New historians' use the capital H in 'History' to signal the difference between dominant versions of the past delivered by history as a grand narrative and the 'other' historical accounts within a society or a nation

---

<sup>1</sup> Other visual representation of modernism's idea of a man is 'The Scream' by Edvard Munch, which shows a man in chaos, confusion, distortion and a crisis of existence. Modernism presents newer ideas on the representation of man, time, memory and consciousness.

<sup>2</sup> Novels, such as Mrs Dalloway (1925) and To the Lighthouse (1927), deal with the idea of memory and the impossibility of measuring its depth through time and space. These works talk about how memories serve as the architectures of human subjectivity and highlight the uncertainty and fluidity of experiences. Her works mark an important development in the modernist period with the emergence of the technical innovation of the 'stream of consciousness' (SoC) over the conventions of the 19th-century realist model. SoC locates a person within the complex intermingling of the present and the past through a series of recollections and traces the subjectivity, interiority and psychological state of a human being. Also see William James's Principles of Psychology (1890). <sup>3</sup> We may talk about Foucault's idea of an archive as we further our discussion on postcolonial literature and memory studies, whereby the archives of literature and other official records created by those in power dictate what the 'other' remembers about themselves and consider as their identity. However, we must not overlook the possibility of resistance in that the 'others' and marginalised communities may also use the notion of archiving to create alternate histories.

(Jenkins, 1999). History thus stands for a certain notion of truth and a certain notion of referentiality. It may seem to question the epistemological status of its object of study - the past - and yet fail to engage with how the past itself is variously conceptualised and constituted as history, memory or archive<sup>3</sup>. Marianne Hirsch goes one step further and associates the intergenerational trauma of the past (in particular, the Holocaust) with the concept of 'post-memory' in her work, 'The Generation of Postmemory: Writing and Visual Culture After the Holocaust' (2012), which is powerful in the sense that it has connections to the 'past' through objects, habitual or acquired behaviours, and is not mediated through recollection only but through "representation, projection and through creation" (Hirsch, 2012). Toni Morrison's concept of 'rememory'<sup>4</sup> addresses the recollections of things that a person has forgotten and, as Freud<sup>5</sup> puts it, repressed in one's unconscious, with the intention to come to terms with one's personal, cultural and collective history in order to move on from the haunt of "disremembered and unaccounted for" ghosts<sup>6</sup> of bygone times (Morrison 1987, p. 323). We cannot heal something which we do not feel; memory for Morrison is 'emotional' and 'alive' - "what the nerves and the skin remembers as well as how it appeared" (Morrison 2008, p.77) - and needs to be acknowledged and reclaimed to break the cycle of pain for "some kind of a tomorrow" (1987, p. 322).

Memory as a concept, theme, and/or trope has thus developed into a new paradigm of cultural studies in as much as it proves a groundbreaking figure in other branches of humanities, such as literature, media and film

---

<sup>3</sup> We may talk about Foucault's idea of an archive as we further our discussion on postcolonial literature and memory studies, whereby the archives of literature and other official records created by those in power dictate what the 'other' remembers about themselves and consider as their identity. However, we must not overlook the possibility of resistance in that the 'others' and marginalised communities may also use the notion of archiving to create alternate histories.

<sup>4</sup> A concept she gave in her Nobel Prize-winning novel *Beloved* (1987), which became an important term in postcolonial studies.

<sup>5</sup> Freud's use of inherited memory in *Moses and Monotheism*. Freud's hypothesis of a real event "allows [him] to argue that both culture and individual minds are always in a pained retrospective attitude—guilty, remorseful, confused. However absurd or groundless the hypothesis may seem, it is the conceptual anchor of a retrospective theory of subjectivity that, at whatever cost to identity, is constituted in a crisis of retrospection" (p. 71). The crisis and suffering or ordeal of the individual is remembering what s/he has not experienced but carries within him/her as instinctive, evolutionary memory of the ancestors. This crisis of retrospection is noted in Freud's theorising wherein his "retrospective search for origins and meanings" leads him to discover "anguish: terror, grief, remorse, helplessness" (p. 74). Also, note Carl Jung's 'collective unconscious' or 'racial memory' theory; see Rob White, 'Freud's Memory', 2008.

<sup>6</sup> In the deep south, millions of African Americans endured brutal treatment by white overseers or slave drivers who were determined to get as much labour as they could out of the slaves, which would result in heavy profits for these white masters. At the same time, these African Americans faced a constant loss of loved ones, homeland, identity and increasingly rigid slave laws, which were designed to keep the slaves under strict control. 'Beloved', in this context, is a text which goes beyond statistics and accounts, imagining the profound psychological cost of slavery to the men, women, and children - to whom no one was held accountable for and for whom no death is recognised in the present context as nameless bodies lie piled up or thrown into the water across the Middle Passage. It attempts to remember and give space to a time and history marginalised into oblivion by the dominant notions of society and nation at large. The text explores the theme of slavery and interrogates the meaning of freedom. The absence-presence of the literal, metaphorical and psychological ghosts represents variously the idea of the haunt and trauma of the past, and the inability to heal, free yourself from a lost history and move on. Another text which deeply indulges in the role of memory in remembering the past and tries to find alternatives to heal and recreate self-identity, as well as community feeling, is Fred D'Aguiar's *Feeding the Ghosts* (1997).

studies, architecture and archaeology, and postcolonial studies. Furthermore, we should not forget that the concept of memory has always held a firm place in natural and social sciences: cognitive psychology and neuropsychology, trauma studies, cultural and narrative psychology, neurobiology, law, sociology and political science being among the most prominent. Redstone, in her work, 'Memory and Methodology', notes this impressive spectrum of disciplines that "do[es] memory work" (2000, p.12), raising awareness about the complexity of various areas in memory studies and contests the disciplines' understanding of what exactly memory is and what theory and methods could be used to investigate it. On one hand, she explains memory as the inner workings of the mind, the processes of storing, forgetting and recalling. On the other hand, she raises a debate on whether it is more aligned with "history, community, tradition, the past, reflection and authenticity" or with "fantasy, subjectivity, invention, the present, representation and fabrication." (Radstone, 2000, p. 6).

The way memory works, thus, can be painful or restorative but always a dynamic process of seeking and remaking. It both unifies and fragments experience and locates us as agents within our own lives, which we often narrate as a story, with scenes from the past altered over time. Therefore, we remain cautious and sceptical about our memories while also embracing the creative aspects they bring to our lives in the form of writings, arts, etc. We fill in the gaps, probe the dark corners of our minds to broaden our perspectives and interpret an elusive 'self' that is often shaped by childhood experiences or education (nurture) or by adaptation (nature). Mark Philip Freeman links memory with this concept of 'self' explaining how memory often has nothing to do with "recounting the past but with making sense of it...[memory] is an interpretative act, the end of which is an enlarged understanding of the self" (1993, p.29). Memory thus plays a significant role in identity formation or identity construction. Who people are is closely linked to what they remember<sup>7</sup> and what they can claim to remember. Meaning, forgetting<sup>8</sup> is equally vital in identity-formation: "Identity of any kind requires steering a course between holding on and letting go. Identity is not composed of a fixed set of memories but lies in the dialectical, ceaseless activity of remembering and forgetting, assimilating and discarding" (Antze and Lambek 1996, p. xxix).

In his path-breaking studies, 'The Social Framework of Memory, and On Collective Memory', the French

---

<sup>7</sup> Sir Frederic Bartlett, considered by many to be the father of the modern psychology of memory, titled his classic work

<sup>8</sup> Remembering' as a way of emphasising the active processes of engagement in the "effort after meaning" (1995, p. 20).<sup>8</sup>forgetting is used in a broad, comprehensive sense, covering misremembering and repressing also. Remembering and forgetting are interdependent features. They not only are communicative actions and help in identity formation but also are institutional forms of transmission of knowledge. Forgetting is as much a function of memory-making as is remembering.

sociologist and founder of collective memory studies, Maurice Halbwachs, provides an extensive analysis of how social groups remember and perpetuate their collective pasts. He believes in the plurality of shared experiences of groups - geographical, positional, political, ideological, generational - which exert a great influence on the content of personal memories and help (re)construct and/or distort the past in a way “partly, if not wholly, shaped, by the present [needs]” (Halbwachs, p. 25). His ideas highlight that personal, individual memory is always connected to collective, social memory and vice versa. In postcolonial studies, Foucault explains that there is a nexus between power and knowledge; dominant groups, nations, and states often control what is to be culturally prescribed, narratively programmed and remembered, and what is to be erased, obliterated and forgotten. Often, it is noted that the established norms, rules and regulations in a society and nation at large do not allow for individual and collective interventions. However, memories may become sites for contestation and resistance, transgression and subversion while also uplifting a community’s status and celebrating its uniqueness. They become cultural repositories: an incredibly rich source of evidence against the official history, which tends to push the ‘other’ towards the periphery. The malleability of (memories of) the past helps us re-work and reclaim our identities - collective, cultural, social and personal - as well as mend our relation with the past: the two major functions of memory. This instrumentalisation of the past may rewrite history as described by George Orwell in 1984; the burning of books, the destruction of inscriptions, and the changing of names<sup>9</sup> may be seen as acts of intentional and violent cultural oblivion. Dystopian novels like Margaret Atwood’s *The Handmaid’s Tale* and Yoko Ogawa’s *The Memory Police* present these (extreme) cases of instrumentalisation and are some of the best cultural instances of memory manipulation and brainwashing. Although, it is not necessary to wait for twentieth-century totalitarianism to note these instances. Louis XIV’s censor sanctioned changes, suppression or correction in information about the past as deemed fit according to the varying political situations (Burke, 1992, p.126). Foucault’s ‘counter-memory’<sup>10</sup>, therefore, runs as a mechanism (in a sense) to check and challenge the official accounts and/or available written records of governments, mainstream mass media and dominants in society to maintain the integrity of a nation in order to create a pluralistic space where groups, races, communities may freely make competing claims on ‘their’ idea of what the past is.

---

<sup>9</sup> Derek Walcott’s poem, ‘Names’, which also delves into a beautiful idea of the changing realities and the waves that erase the names written on the sands of time in order to make space to write ‘new’ history all over again. Also, see Ursula K. Le Guin’s short story, ‘She Unnames Them’ (1985), as an example of subverting dominant history.

<sup>10</sup> The term was coined by Michel Foucault in his essay, ‘Nietzsche, Genealogy, History’, published in English in ‘Language, Counter-Memory, Practice: Selected Essays and Interviews by Michel Foucault’ by Donald F. Bouchard. Foucault explains the three modalities of history: “the third is sacrificial, directed against truth, and opposes history as knowledge. It implies the use of history that severs its connection to memory, its metaphysical and anthropological model, and constructs a counter-memory - a transformation of history into a totally different form of time.” In other words, counter-memory is an individual act of resistance to relentlessly question the veracity of “history as true knowledge.”

We have, so far, briefly discussed the various types of memories and its functions in memory studies, attempting to link it with postcolonial studies, majorly through postcolonial literature. Let us now further our case and analyse in depth how memory features in postcolonial literature and subsequently understand novels and poetry as reservoirs of cultural and counter-memory. We shall then locate North-East India (in particular, Arunachal Pradesh) within the realm of internal colonisation and insecurities of state conflicts and explore the role of North-East Indian Poetry in English as a (memory) storehouse<sup>11</sup> of people's as well as the ancestral past through the poems of Mamang Dai, an Adi poet from Arunachal Pradesh, excavating tribal memory, "removed from politics, the ups and downs of our states, marching towards progress and all that" (Dai 2010)<sup>12</sup>.

## 2. Postcolonial Literature and Memory

Postcolonialism, in simplest terms, means 'which was once colonised.' It suggests a kind of temporality related to that which has happened and has been left behind. The Oxford English Dictionary records the very first use of the term 'Postcolonialism' in a British newspaper article in 1959 concerning the historical and political context of India and decolonisation. Postcolonialism was then used only as a periodising concept - that India is an independent nation. A self-conscious theoretical understanding of the term began to take shape in the 1970s, which Aijaz Ahmad notes in his 1992 work, 'In Theory: Classes, Nations, and Literatures': "the first major debate on the idea of Postcolonialism took place...not in cultural studies but in political theory where the object of inquiry was the postcolonial state." It was Edward Said who shifted the focus of study from geopolitical contestations of imperialism to the cultural and ideological hegemony of the rulers over the ruled. His seminal work, 'Orientalism' (1978), which is also the foundational text of postcolonial theory, and his 1993 work, 'Culture and Imperialism', posit the influence of Foucault<sup>13</sup> and Gramsci<sup>14</sup> in postcolonial studies, discusses the

---

<sup>11</sup> The archive, the wax tablet, the storehouse, the store-room were among the most used metaphors of memory in Western literature – from Aristotle, Plato, St Augustine to cognitive psychology.

<sup>12</sup> Mamang Dai's interview with Arundhati Subramaniam in 2010 compiled *The Land as "Living Presence."*

<sup>13</sup> Edward Said was influenced by Michel Foucault's discourse of power whereby he examines how the passive Orient (the East) mirrors the opinions of the active Occident (the West) and aims to recognise and dismantle the claims of the Eurocentric discourses. In a 1993 article, "Foucault Primer", Alec Mehou and Wendy Grace write that "Foucault's idea of 'discourse' shows the historically specific relations between disciplines (bodies of knowledge) and disciplinary practices (forms of social control and social practices)." According to Foucault, there is a nexus between truth and knowledge, and power on the other hand. It is power, the "disciplinary practices" of society that allows a certain kind of knowledge to take shape and dis-allows other kinds of knowledge from forming. What we understand as knowledge is really this coming together of "disciplines" - bodies of knowledge - and "disciplinary practices." Said uses the Foucauldian idea of archive to understand the discourse of the East, which is homogenised and stereotyped as the Orient by the West using its power - both hard and soft - to establish a hegemony.

<sup>14</sup> Marxist scholar Antonio Gramsci, who protested against State Fascism in Italy, influenced Said through his concept of hegemony, which he examined not as simply a question of domination and resistance but investigated the role of culture in the domination of power. He defines hegemony as "the ability of a ruling power's values to live in the minds and lives of his subalterns as a spontaneous expression of their own interests." Also see: Raymond Williams' definition of hegemony in his work, 'Marxism and Literature', 1977.

importance of articulation of culture in the domination of power and how literature is “an incorporative, quasi-encyclopaedic cultural form” (Said, p. 88). This form becomes a crucial method with which colonised people across the globe resist and assert their identity and the existence of their own histories and narratives<sup>15</sup>. It should be noted, however, that all these field-defining books of Said, Bhabha, Spivak, Ashcroft, Griffiths and Tiffin on postcolonialism hardly make any mention of memory. Therefore, postcolonial studies hold a paradoxical relationship with memory and must be comprehended. Even a detailed study on the politics of memory by Radstone and Schwarz offers scattered and loose references to postcolonialism and memory. If anything, I believe Ngugi Wa Thiong’o best concludes the interconnectedness of history, culture, memory and language in his essay<sup>16</sup>: “language as culture is the collective memory bank of a people’s experience in history” (p.112). He presents the dual nature of literature and language as a means of communication and as carriers of oral narratives, myths, stories and folktales, which make up the cultural repositories of a community used for its identity construction and relation with the past.

Yet again, in the introduction to the influential book *Acts of Memory*<sup>17</sup>: *Cultural Recall in the Present*, cultural theorist Mieke Bal posits that “cultural memory can be located in literary texts because the latter is continuous with the communal fictionalising, idealising, monumentalising impulses thriving in a conflicted culture” (1999, p. xiii). Thus, the literary text is a medium - a ‘cultural tool’, a ‘soft power’<sup>18</sup>- that hugely influences which memories, stories and recollections of the past are to be narrated and transmitted for the public. Literature is thus a complex “site of memory” that preserves, advances, controls and subverts cultural meaning. Novels, poems, slave narratives, autobiographies, memoirs, life writings, etc., are preserves of individual memories, which are crucial for advocating the pluralistic nature of the historical record (outside the official statements) that creates a collective communal memory. But where does poetry stand in particular with regards to postcolonial studies?

---

<sup>15</sup> In a 1992 essay, “Orientalism Reconsidered”, Said acknowledges that he overlooked the possibility of resistance against imperialism among the colonised people in his work *Orientalism*, and wishes to stand corrected and mentions the hope of forging new identities and interpretations: a future of hybrid existence and multiple cultures.

<sup>16</sup> Taken from his work, *Decolonising the Mind* (1986).

<sup>17</sup> Which features in the title of this paper as well.

<sup>18</sup> Soft power includes the role of literature, influence of culture, control over communication and media, etc., while hard power includes economic and military might. Both these powers lead to the “othering” of the East and its cultures.

Many scholars argue that poetry is a non-transparent, highly figurative and dense medium to voice the concerns of postcolonial societies. They believe that poetry is stubbornly national, non-hybrid<sup>19</sup> and local in tone to recapitulate the vast global history, politics and sociology of colonised nations. However, critics like Jahan Ramazani<sup>20</sup> and Rajiv S. Patke<sup>21</sup>, in their respective studies, lament the neglect and ignorance meted out to postcolonial poetry in contemporary times and extol the richness of the genre with multivalent symbols and paradoxes, ironies and metaphors that are “suited to register and negotiate the contradictions of a split cultural experience.” “Wrapped up” with “a heap of signifying” (Ellison 1952, p. 379), postcolonial poetry may dynamically engage with history in the discursive articulation of postcolonial subjectivity and its underlying rhetoric of resistance, which destabilised the authority of dominant history. The postcolonial poet conceptualises the colonial past as a zone of imaginative recovery and recuperation that needs to be revisited to understand how it shapes the postcolonial present. Poetry not only focuses on this negotiation but also attempts to reshape traditions and present alternate realities, the insecurities of displacement, fragmentation and alienation of the self, frailty of survival and the persistence of hope. It attempts to reaffirm a sense of belongingness and gives a platform to invoke the cultural past that foregrounds the possibility of a new articulation and creation of “forms that originate in imitation [of the Western texts] but end in invention” (Walcott 1974).

Poetry’s rebuilding and re-memoration is often seen as a “response to [...] a rupture” (Bardenstein 1999, p.148), a lack, an absence or consolation for something that is missing. Maybe also, an attempt to deal with the state of ‘in-betweenness’ and ‘double consciousness’, as explored by Homi K. Bhabha when he suggests that we live “on the borderlines of the ‘present’...neither a new horizon nor a leaving behind of the past” (Bhabha 1994). These absences, ruptures and lacks are what characterise and distinguish the shape and texture of individual or collective memories conveyed through a plethora of poetry whereby the structures, themes, figures of speeches (such as mixed metaphors, allusions), and an intertextual dialogue with canonical literature frames the central argument into a discourse of history, memory and archive. In doing so, they listen to (imposed) silences<sup>22</sup>, historicise the

---

<sup>19</sup> The concept of hybridity is taken from Homi K. Bhabha’s observations in ‘The Location of Culture’ (1994), referring to the instability of identities in a postcolonial world.

<sup>20</sup> Work called ‘The Hybrid Muse: Postcolonial Poetry in English’ (2001)

<sup>21</sup> Work titled Postcolonial Poetry in English, 2006

<sup>22</sup> In her book, *White Amnesia - Black Memory?*, Sabine Bröck argues along the same lines when she says that “the pervasive ellipses of Western historiography will only be pointed out and filled in by way of the (literary) imagination” (1994, p. 24).

past, and serve as a counter hegemonic chronicle<sup>23</sup>.

The role of North-East Indian Poetry in English may well be understood as a constant struggle over articulation, recognition, and function of language in the expression of race, region, and place in postcolonial India. Said claims that every nation has its own internal 'other', which stands doubly marginalised by global imperialism that colonises a nation and the internal colonisation faced by them against the mainstream/canonical social traditions. While India was itself a colony of the British Raj, North-East India, too stood doubly neglected globally as well as within India. If poetry is externalised memory, writing about the loss of home, identity, and belongingness, can a group of internally colonised people use the coloniser's language (English, here) to paint a picture of their pain, struggles and the silenced tales of their past(s)? This is better explained by invoking the concept of 'minor' literature as expounded in Gilles Deleuze and Felix Guattari's 1975 study, 'Kafka: Towards a Minor Literature.' Minor literature is a work "which a minority constructs within a major language" that has been "deterritorialised" through defamiliarising devices (Deleuze 1975). The attempt of the minor poet is to open up alternate poetic spaces to safeguard an ethnic past against the homogenising attempts of the mainstream. However, postcolonial (in particular, North-East Indian) poetry must not be mistaken for regionalism. Poets and writers from North-East of India aim to write from the margins of the country to represent their culture and inculcate it into the country's multicultural setting. For this, the oral quality of poetry, which harbours a deep connection to North-east Indian roots, also becomes important. A look at the poetry of Mamang Dai will substantiate this line of thought.

### **3. Arunachal Pradesh and Mamang Dai**

Arunachal Pradesh is popularly known to be the land of dawn-lit mountains. It was declared as a state in 1987. Arunachal homes a diverse culture with a myriad range of festivals, dances, folklore and languages. Prior to its statehood, it was called the North East Frontier Agency (NEFA) and was directly under the administration of the Ministry of External Affairs, Government of India. The strategic location of Arunachal, which shares international borders with Bhutan, Myanmar, Tibet and China, puts the state in constant political and public gaze. Not just this, since Independence, the administrative machinery of North-East India has remained under the influence and control of majorly Bengalis and Assamese, the trade by the Marwaris and education mostly by

---

<sup>23</sup> Influenced by theorists such as Antonio Gramsci and Michel Foucault, postcolonial studies have explored relations and tensions between 'official' history and its contestation by unofficial, popular memory or "counter-memories" (cf. Foucault, 1997). Thus, in telling one story about the past, other stories about real or possible alternative versions of the past are excluded, rejected and overwritten.

Christian missionaries. The indigenous habitants of the region are marginalised and pushed to the peripheries within their own homeland. In the wake of such political neglect and economic exploitation faced by them, this region becomes an inevitable epicentre of extreme backwardness, underdevelopment and poverty. To make matters worse within the dominant national imagination, people from the northeast are often mistaken to be Chinese, Nepalese or Oriental and referred with derogatory labels such as 'Chinki.' This emerging politics of racism is marked by an internalisation of the processes of colonisation, which alienates a group of people within their own nation, making them rootless, restless and insecure (Baruah 2006, p.165-76). Against this backdrop of discrimination and intolerance, the literary writers from the north-east face the challenge of empowering their people, celebrating their cultures, festivals, and languages, uplifting the whole community with a strong sense of ethnic identity that could resist the homogenising tendencies of the Indian mainland towards the geographically aloof and 'othered' North-East India. Arunachal Pradesh is divided into five cultural zones. Out of these, one zone covers parts of the Upper Subansiri and the East and West Siang districts, where the Adis, a major tribe, dominate. Verrier Elwin (1902-64), one of the earliest anthropologists to work in Arunachal Pradesh, advocated a policy of isolation for the state. However, this has now been replaced by a policy of inclusive development, which influences the social, cultural, religious and linguistic heterogeneity of the place<sup>24</sup>.

In her book, *Arunachal Pradesh: The Hidden Land*, Dai discusses the conviction framework of the Arunachalis before the British colonialism in their region. The historical backdrop of the Northeast goes back to their migration from Myanmar, where the Mongoloid tribal groups dwell. They fled and settled in the lower regions of what is now Northeast India. Their customary ethics included the conviction for spirits, devils, forest Gods with a mix of belief in higher powers, animism, supernaturalism, odd notions and shamanism. Indigenous literary works are compositions created by unique, local individuals and their descendants, and as such in writing about stories, Dai creates and authors a tribe which is powerful and enigmatic. The Arunachalis are animists, worshipping the gods of nature. They believe in a just and benevolent, omnipresent and omniscient supreme god. For instance, 'Donyi-Polo' (the sun-moon god), as a religious faith, unifies people in major parts of Arunachal. There is also a great influx of migrants from the rest of India and the neighbouring countries in the field of trade, construction and administrative services, with whom comes the religious faiths and cultures into the state. As such, Christianity, Hinduism, Islam, Jainism and Sikhism make a part of the state's culture. The practice of

---

<sup>24</sup> Also see Verrier Elwin, *Myths of the North-East Frontier of India* (Shillong: North East Frontier Agency, Shillong, 1958); *India's North-East Frontier in the Nineteenth Century* (London: Oxford University Press, 1959); *A New Book of Tribal Fiction*, (Shillong: DIPR, North-East Frontier Agency, 1970); *The Art of the North-East Frontier of India* (Directorate of Research, Govt of Arunachal Pradesh, 1988).

Buddhism in Arunachal is locally influenced by the tradition of nature worship, food habits, etc. The festivals insofar are related to agricultural activities such as sowing and harvesting. These are collective rituals performed and celebrated by the communities as a whole. 'Solung' is a local festival celebrated by the Adis in Siang and Dibang valley, 'Nyokom' is celebrated by Nyishis. Similarly, 'Mopin' by Gallongs, 'Lossar' by Monpas, 'Dree' by Apatanis, 'Loku' by Noctes and 'Boori-Boot' is celebrated by the Hill Miris, respectively. These are a product of the co-habitation of innumerable tribes and sub-tribes in the region and, above all, their growing interaction with one another in modern times against the onset of globalisation and technological advancements.

Arunachal Pradesh has many dialects, most of these belonging to the Tibeto-Burman language family. Notedly, people living in specific cultural zones of the state speak distinct languages. Oftentime, the dialect and language of one zone remain unintelligible to other zones and communities of the state. Only the Khamtis, living mainly in the Lohit region bordering Myanmar, have a language with a distinct script. The other languages of the state do not have a script and, therefore, have traditionally preserved their literature, myths and legends in the oral form. Constructing the local history of different tribes by utilising and analysing the available oral literature proves an exciting area of study for the students of social sciences in contemporary times. The linguistic diversities of the state and the inability to communicate without a common language have led to a situation where the need for the English language for communication has arisen; it has become one of the official languages in administration and a medium of instruction in schools of modern and global society, especially after the end of colonial rule in India. Weaving words, metaphors, and similes from diverse languages and dialects into English, the literature thus produced reflects a stewed understanding of the political scenario of Arunachal Pradesh, the people's love for their land, its oral narratives, myths and legends, as well as a beautiful evocation of the natural surroundings. Mamang Dai's writings lay claim to a rich reservoir of many such homegrown symbols that arise from her self-consciousness of being a tribal: "I am a tribal, and the geography, landscape, our myths, stories, all this has shaped my thoughts" (Dai 2005, OCMAON<sup>25</sup>).

Dai is an Adi poet, author, journalist and historian, writing in English, who hails from Itanagar in Arunachal Pradesh. She attempts to open up a whole new discursive universe and present narratives derived not from an outsider's perspective but from a tribal's through her writings, especially her poetry. This makes her poems an

---

<sup>25</sup> Acronym of 'On Creation Myths and Oral Narratives'

act of reclamation, which is possible only when stories stored in the collective memory of a tribe find expression in literature via literature: “ours is an oral tradition. I was trying to meet people and collect and record these oral narratives...the small histories which were getting lost and when you talk to people even small things can trigger your memories off.” (Dai 2010) She is in particular influenced by the creation myths and inquires of our origins in another article, “where else can we begin but [in] myth and memory?” (Mandal 2016), and yet again, “...the legends and stories are still a wellspring of thought and emotions that are restored in a peculiar blend of myth and memory unique to the region.” (Dai 2010) Her first collection of poems, *River Poems*, published in 2004, established her as a major emerging voice from North-east India. With the poetry of Mamang Dai which is rooted in the act of recalling, recollecting and writing, the mosaic of postcolonialism undergoes a further revelation. Her poetry forges and constructs ethnic identity through the poetic act of writing about the land: the emotional memory which Morrison talks about - “writers are like that: remembering what we were, what valley we ran through, what banks were like, the light that was there and the route back to our original place” (Morrison, p.77). Dai insists on the role the land and its biodiversity plays in shaping the tribe’s identity, and therefore needs to be understood and accounted for within an alternate epistemological framework in as much as the tribal belief in animism serves as a philosophical chassis for Dai’s poetry. Lastly, her poetry links the importance of women as active agents in storing history and culture who hold these oral narratives in the form of songs, tales, bodily tattoos, taboos etc. Culture can be maintained or negated by maintaining or negating cultural significations present either on the bodies as markers or inside the body in the form of stereotypes and traditions. And hence, the act of destroying the body is equivalent to the destruction of a nation. As such women’s bodies and wombs are considered as carriers of culture, inheritance and memories. Fred A’guiar gave the beautiful concept of the ‘amnesiacal wombs’ (1997, p. 76) in his novel, *Feeding the Ghosts*<sup>26</sup>, when talking about the loss of inheritance of African culture. In the Jungian sense, these wombs were sites of ‘racial memory,’ and children as such are carriers of intuitive memory.

Let us now examine how Mamang Dai’s poetry restores the mythic past, tribal memories and cultures within its verses.

---

<sup>26</sup> In biosciences, the theory of recapitulation states that the foetus in the womb goes through all generations of its life from single cell to amphibian form to human form by showing rudimentary signs of double eyelids, a tail etc. In literature, we understand this idea as a human baby’s ability to instinctively remember the past generations, an idea explored in the novel explaining how the babies may remember the ancientness of their cultures and traditions and may carry them forward. However, slavery, loss of homeland, multiple rapes and brutality inflicted on the bodies removes all such possibility and instead produces a new race altogether - of miscegenation and hurt.

#### 4. Nature, Women and Tribal Inheritance in Mamang Dai's River Poems

*"We made our vows but you had no faith." (Egret River 106-7)*

Dai's poetry has survived "many journeys and forgetfulness before they were completed"<sup>27</sup> (Dai 2004). Written in various cities across the country and abroad, her poems suffer from the pangs of a painful romance with unfaithful history which refuses to acknowledge the 'vows' it made with her homeland: promises of remembering its cultures and traditions, people and stories. As history fails the people of Arunachal Pradesh, Dai's poems attempt to reclaim the land and articulate the ethnic identity of her people. Therefore, her poetry is a poetry of landscapes, mountains, rivers, of air, trees, seasons and of rain that encapsulates Arunachal Pradesh. The biodiversity which she captures in her poems becomes a signifier of what defines her tribe and tribal upbringing. The memories which the air carries, the stories it whistles about, the thirst for knowledge which the rivers meander and carry forth along with the voice of unspoken, lost times echoing in the mountains that exist as old mentors and teachers of civilizations, everything resonates the symbolic identity of the tribal community. For this reason, Dai's poetry ought to be read from an ecocritical perspective, recording the interconnectedness and interdependence of the land, its people and the diverse natural environment, adopting an alternative approach against the anthropocentric approach. Not just this, the tribal belief in animism that serves as a philosophical framework for her poetry clearly identifies the land as a 'living presence' (Dai 2010) whereby the physical world merges with the unseen spiritual world (where there is no value hierarchy or dualism or binary) - a river, mountain or a plant is equally sacred and capable of life as is an animal or a human.

This philosophy vehemently opposes the colonial and imperialist attitude towards environment and maybe seen as an attempt to safeguard nature from the onslaughts of the capitalist commercialism that erodes the nature, and degrades the biodiversity of the region, which is an alternate epistemological framework for the articulation of autonomous ethnic identity of the tribal people. For instance, her poem, 'The Voice of the Mountain'<sup>28</sup>, generates an allegorical world by personifying the mountain as an 'old man.' The mountain is old, evergreen and has existed since times immemorial. It has changed, grown and outgrown many civilisations and epochs. However, its base and roots with the earth remain unchanged. The mountain has territories 'both ancient and new' as is the case with the life of a civilization that keeps growing and changing with each era. During times of transferences and phases of transitions, the mountain is the 'chance syllable that orders the world/ instructed

---

<sup>27</sup> Lines taken from the Author's Note in the collection

<sup>28</sup> This poem is taken from 'The Oxford Anthology of Writings from North-east India: Poetry and Essays', 2011, and hereon, abbreviated as 'AVOM.

with history and miracles' (TVOM 20-3) because even if a civilization, language or culture dies, the mountain, the soil, and the roots may continue to live on as a symbol of that culture or a civilization's memories. Nature thus is the standard of remembrance on which tribal writings are based on: 'I am the place where memory escapes/ the myth of time,/ I am the sleep in the mind of the mountain' (TVOM 48-50). Yet another poem, Images, claims: 'I know where memory hides,/ in the long body of the mountain...' (34-5). Besides this, Dai deploys her rhetorical power of suggestion to intensify the feeling with which cultural memory is reprocessed and longed for in her poems: "why did we think gods would survive/ deathless in memory,/ in trees and stones and the sleep of babies" (Remembrance 17-9). She explains that when we cease to remember and deliberately exclude from our minds the presence of traditions, we kill our identities. She talks about how "we stare at the outline of the hill,/ lifting our eyes to the invincible sky" (Remembrance 28-9) and discloses how the tribal communities dwelling in the mountains have no listener to their histories and no one to remember them except their gods and the natural world. Dai cries defenselessly and anticipates respect and justice for the traditions of her land.

The absence of the accessibility of assets, political and monetary limits, indigenous issues and information additionally obstructs and disconnects the Northeast region and the indigenous individuals living in and around it. Dai does not divorce her writings from the reality of violence and bloodshed that drowns the region. Her poems very subtly harbour the insecurities faced by her people either directly, as in the lines that talk of the 'footfall of soldiers' (Remembrance 12) scattered on the hills, or indirectly through the carnivorous and oxymoronic description of the terrain: "the jungle is a big eater" (Remembrance 15); "the cloud is this uncertain pulse/ that sits over my heart" (TVOM 31-3). Dai advocates the need for us to be the generational breakers<sup>29</sup>, those who 'leave [the] spear' and try to communicate - 'make a sign' (TVOM 14-5) - with the rest of the world that wishes to forge connections with the Northeast region. She constantly reminds us how the region is in a state of in-betweenness and suffers from a "deep-seated conflict between what is and what could have been, the hiatus between the past and the present" (Guha 2010). Dai's poetry reflects the trauma, tiredness, hurt and sadness of a society in transition under the shadows of insurgency, counter-insurgency, and state and non-state violence<sup>30</sup>: "in the hidden exchange of news we hear/ that weapons are multiplying..." ( Remembrance 13-4) and how a child dies "at the edge of the world/ the distance between end and hope" (TVOM 40-1).

---

<sup>29</sup> Those who end a particular cycle of trauma so that the next generation does not carry on the memories or the insecurities of the past.

<sup>30</sup> To name a few conflicts: The Border Conflict of 1962, 1967 Nathu La and Cho La Clashes, the Shino-Indian Border dispute of 2006, the 2017 Doklam Military standoff, etc.

Another poem, “The Missing Link”, traces the origin myth, customs, and traditions of Arunachal Pradesh as Dai recalls the oral stories and the excruciating recollections of the difficulties her ancestors faced as they fled and migrated to the foothills of Arunachal: “I will remember then/ the great river...when the seven brothers fled south” (TML 1-10) She draws upon the folk culture of her tribe to evolve an alternate narrative of the mythic creation of the world, and credits the two brothers, Lupon Rimbuche and Chom Dande, with the creation of human beings and the world they inhabit. The oral conventions of the state profoundly act as the ‘missing link’ between the past and the present, imparting tribal wisdom and knowledge acting as archives of memory and traditions. Dai laments the absence of historical records and hopes her poetry to become the surviving evidence of the lost or decaying legacies of the state. With the fast growing industrial and complex political setting of Arunachal, the members of the community are slowly losing touch with their ancestral roots and the natural gathering places and worshipping methods. Not just this, the lack of written evidence makes the case of the existing tribal practices weak. Dai pleads that one must “remember the river’s voice” (lines 38-9) and that we begin in silence and are carved by memory: “where else could we belong,/ if not of memory/ divining life and form/ out of silence...” (TML 41-5). She insists on the importance of remembering the myths and listening to the voices, suppressed and fading, that call from the ‘sanctuary of the gorge’ and speak about the ‘vanished land.’ Another poem, ‘Song of the Dancers’, makes a reference to the ritual Ponung Dance of the Adis performed by young girls, while ‘Tapu’ deals with the dance performed by men during the time of community fencing. There is a strong desire and anticipation of being recollected: “what are the words we will tell/ our sons and daughters?” (Tapu 13-4). Dai notes how these “silent hillmen...await the long-promised letters/ and the meaning of words” (TML 66-7) like an “unknown destiny...the invisible place / we can neither forget, nor survive” (Sleepwalking 5-7). Henceforth, the use of language mixed with tribal metaphors and tales in her writings became greatly significant.

Dai notes the noxious practices and ‘poisonous rituals’ of the old in her poem, ‘The Missing Link’, and examines how these should not be the reasons for prejudices, discrimination and marginalisation against the North-Easterns and should be understood simply as confirmations of their own identity and ethnic practices - a part of a rich heritage which adds value to the nation’s culture in general. Men and women of North-east India are known for their fortitude, as they confront the night to battle the venomous creatures: “where men and women/ dwelt, facing the night,/guarding the hooded poison” ( TML 18-20). Agriculture and fishing are the main sources of livelihood; as the poet says, “the river was the green/ and white vein of our lives” (TML 22-3). Dai also extols the womenfolk of the states who act as cultural torchbearers and identity generators, spicing the

social development of the lamps (i.e., children) of a civilisation: “...remember...voices/of deaf women/ framing the root of light/ in the first stories/ to the children of the tribe” ( TML 32-7); Dai reminds us of the role women play as carriers of language and memories, lamenting the sufferings of the “woman lost in translation” (TVOM 44) - skipped in pages, unspoken in syllables and hidden behind silences. Dai merges the female voice and body with the natural landscape (ecocriticism and ecofeminism in Dai’s poetry) and is able to identify the dualistic structure of otherness and negation. Preeti Gill notes how North-east women “find themselves at the receiving end of the violence on three fronts, from the states, the militants, and a corresponding escalation of violence within their own homes” (Gill 8), and yet they struggle and survive, “with happiness to carry on” (TVOM 45) and pass on to the generations to come.

## **5. Conclusion**

Due to the absence of the most authentic histories and credible accounts, numerous scholars work towards the job of composing and recovering the identity of the Northeast. In a way, this empowers a person to connect oneself with one’s social chronicles, memories, collective and personal, and, of course, good morale. This connection becomes stronger when persons from a particular place whose history is being archived begin speaking and representing themselves through the moral reasoning of their own cultural practices and beliefs. Then we see the hope in uplifting the indigenous literature, as rightly said by Mamang Dai in her verse, “Remember, because nothing is ended/ but it is changed, and memory is a changing shape” (TML 54-7). Things change, and it is our duty to elevate the Northeastern legacy and proclaim its indigenesness. Insofar postcolonialist and postmodernist theorists have demonstrated history’s constructed narratives about the past and the textuality of all past evidence. This informed and aware textuality is the cultural product of a postcolonial poem. As inheritors of a troubled and broken history, we share in equal measure a responsibility to “re-member” the past. Though official accounts may fail to tell the whole truth, in literature (poetry, in particular), we can re-imagine and recreate it.

## References

1. Ahmad, A. (2008). *In Theory: Nations, Classes, Literatures*. Verso Books.
2. Antze, P., & Lambek, M. (1996). *Tense past. Cultural essays in trauma and memory*. New York and London: Routledge.
3. Assmann, A. (1999). *Formen und wandlungen des kulturellen gedächtnisses*. München: Verlag C.H. Beck.
4. Assmann, J. (1992). *Das kulturelle gedächtnis. Schrift, erinnerung und politische identiät in frühen hochkulturen*. München: Verlag C.H. Beck.
5. Atwood, M. (1996). *The Handmaid's Tale*. Vintage.
6. Bal, M., Crewe, J. V., & Spitzer, L. (Eds.). (1999). *Acts of Memory: Cultural Recall in the Present*. Dartmouth College.
7. Bardenstein, C. B. (1999). *Trees, Forests, and the Shaping of Palestinian and Israeli Collective Memory*. 148–168.
8. Baruah, S. (2006). *A New Politics of Race: India and its Northeast*. Oxford UP.
9. Burke, P. (1989). *History, culture and the mind* (pp. 97–113). New York; Blackwell.
10. D'Aguiar, F. (1997). *Feeding the Ghosts*. ranta Books.
11. Dai, M. (2009). *Arunachal Pradesh: The Hidden Land*. Penguin Books India.
12. Dai, M. (2005). *On Creation Myths and Oral Narratives*. India International Centre Quarterly, 32(2/3), 1-6. <http://www.jstor.org/stable/23005996>
13. Dai, M. (2013). *River Poems*. Writers Workshop.
14. Dai, M. (2011). *The Voice of the Mountain' in Tilottama Misra edited The Oxford Anthology of Writings from North-East India: Poetry And Essays*. New Delhi: Oxford University Press.

15. *Decolonising the Mind: The Politics of Language in African Literature*. (1986). J. Currey.
16. Deleuze, G., Guattari, F., & Maclean, M. (1985). *Kafka: Toward a minor literature: The components of expression*. *New Literary History*, 16(3), 591. doi:10.2307/468842
17. Ellison, R. (1952). *Invisible Man*. Penguin Random House.
18. Freeman, M. P. (1993). *Rewriting the Self: History, Memory, Narrative*. Routledge.
19. Gillis, J. R. (1994). *INTRODUCTION. Memory and identity: The history of a relationship*. In J. R. Gillis (Ed.), *Commemorations* (pp. 1–24). doi:10.1515/9780691186658-003
20. Halbwachs, M. (1992). *On Collective Memory (Heritage of Sociology Series)* (L. A. Coser, Ed.; L. A. Coser, Trans.). University of Chicago Press.
21. Hirsch, M. (2012). *The Generation of Postmemory: Writing and Visual Culture After the Holocaust*. Columbia University Press.
22. Huggan, G. (Ed.). (2013). *The Oxford Handbook of Postcolonial Studies*. OUP Oxford.
23. Huysse, A. (1995). *Twilight memories. Making time in a culture of amnesia*. New York: Routedge.
24. Jenkins, K. (1999). *Re-thinking History*. London: Routledge.
25. *The Land as "Living Presence"*. (2010, May 1). Poetry International. Retrieved October 6, 2023, from [https://www.poetryinternational.com/en/poets-poems/article/104-17068\\_The-Land-as-Living-Presence](https://www.poetryinternational.com/en/poets-poems/article/104-17068_The-Land-as-Living-Presence)
26. Mandal (Halder), S. (2016). *Oral Literature: Etched in Print*. *Harvest Journal*, 2, 97-100. Retrieved October, 2023, from <http://www.harvestjournal.net/wp-content/uploads/2017/05/Soma-M..pdf>
27. Morrison, T. (1999). *Beloved*. Vintage.
28. Morrison, T. (1995). *The Site of Memory, in Inventing the Truth: The Art and Craft of Memoir* (pp. 83–102; W. Zinsser, Ed.). Boston; New York; Houghton Mifflin.
29. Ogawa, Y. (2020). *The Memory Police* (S. Snyder, Trans.). Vintage.
30. Orwell, G. (2014). *1984*. India Book Distributors.

31. Patke, R. S. (2006). *Postcolonial Poetry in English*. Oxford University Press.
32. Pilliya, H. (2005). *The Legend of Abo-Tani: The First Man on Earth: ARUNACHAL*. India International Centre Quarterly, 32(2/3), 22-25. <http://www.jstor.org/stable/23006002>
33. Radstone, S. (2000). *Memory and Methodology*. Oxford: Berg.
34. Ramazani, J. (2001). *The hybrid muse: postcolonial poetry in English*. University of Chicago Press.
35. Riley, P. F. (1993). *The fabrication of Louis XIV*. *History Reviews of New Books*, 21(2), 76–77. doi:10.1080/03612759.1993.9948575
36. Said, E. (1978). *Orientalism*. Penguin Classics.
37. Said, E. W. (1994). *Culture and Imperialism*. Vintage.
38. Sati, S. (Ed.). (2015). *A Warble of Postcolonial Voices (Vol. II: POEMS)*. Worldview Publications.
39. Walcott, D. (1974). *The Caribbean: Culture or mimicry?* *Journal of Interamerican Studies and World Affairs*, 16(1), 3–14. doi:10.2307/174997