EUROPEAN JOURNAL OF LIFE SAFETY AND STABILITY (EJLSS)
ISSN2660-9630
www.ejlss.indexedresearch.org Volume 55, 2025 ||



Environmental Consciousness in the Writings of Mamang Dai: Indigenous Ecology, Memory, and the Ethics of Belonging

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Abstract: *Mamang Dai, one of the most distinctive literary voices from Arunachal Pradesh, articulates an environmental consciousness deeply embedded in the indigenous cultural imagination of Northeast India. Her poetry and fiction portray nature not as a passive landscape or aesthetic background but as a living presence participating in the historical, spiritual, and cultural existence of indigenous communities. This paper examines environmental consciousness in selected writings of Dai, particularly her poetry and The Legends of Pensam, with reference also to The Black Hill. Drawing upon ecocritical perspectives, the study argues that Dai's environmental imagination differs significantly from conventional anthropocentric representations of nature because it emerges from an indigenous worldview founded upon reciprocity, sacred geography, ancestral memory, and ecological kinship. Rivers, mountains, forests, rain, stones, birds, and plants in her writings possess cultural and spiritual significance and frequently function as repositories of communal memory. Dai's ecological vision simultaneously registers anxiety concerning modernity, developmental intervention, cultural displacement, and the gradual weakening of traditional relationships between human communities and their environment. Her writings therefore connect ecological loss with cultural and epistemological loss. The paper further demonstrates how oral traditions, myths, legends, and indigenous cosmologies provide Dai with alternative modes of conceptualizing human relationships with the more-than-human world. Her environmental consciousness ultimately advocates an ethics of dwelling based upon humility, continuity, interconnectedness, and responsibility. Dai's literary imagination thus makes an important contribution to Indian environmental literature by foregrounding an indigenous ecological philosophy capable of challenging exploitative and anthropocentric attitudes toward the natural world.*

Keywords: *Mamang Dai, Environmental Consciousness, Ecocriticism, Indigenous Ecology, Northeast India.*

Date of Submission: 20-09-2025 ***Date of Acceptance: 30-10-2025***

Mamang Dai occupies an important position in contemporary Indian English literature because her writings emerge from a geographical and cultural landscape that has historically remained peripheral to dominant representations of India. Arunachal Pradesh, with its mountains, forests, rivers, indigenous communities, oral traditions, myths, and ecological diversity, constitutes not merely the geographical location of Dai's literary imagination but one of its principal epistemological foundations. In her poetry and fiction, environmental consciousness is inseparable from questions of memory, identity, ancestry, spirituality, and belonging. Nature in Dai is therefore much more than scenery. It participates in human existence and often possesses an agency that

destabilizes the conventional distinction between the human subject and the natural object. Such a literary orientation makes Dai particularly significant for ecocritical study. Cheryll Glotfelty famously defines ecocriticism as "the study of the relationship between literature and the physical environment" (xviii). Dai's writings invite precisely such an inquiry, although her representation of environment requires an extension of conventional ecocritical categories toward indigenous ecological knowledge. Her landscapes are simultaneously material, cultural, spiritual, and mnemonic. Mountains, rivers, forests, stones, rain, mist, and vegetation belong to an ecological world in which human history cannot be separated from the history of the land. This deep relationship with landscape is characteristic of a significant body of poetry from Northeast India. Robin S. Ngangom and Kynpham Singh Nongkynrih, in their introduction to *Dancing Earth: An Anthology of Poetry from North-East India*, identify a profound attachment to land, nature, myth, folklore, and identity as defining features of the region's poetic sensibility. Dai's work exemplifies this interrelationship with particular intensity. Her poems repeatedly transform landscape into an archive through which communities remember themselves. The environment preserves histories that written historiography may ignore. Consequently, the river or mountain in Dai cannot be interpreted merely through conventional symbolism; it belongs to a living geography carrying memories of migration, ancestry, violence, survival, and cultural continuity. This conception resembles what Lawrence Buell describes as an environmentally oriented text in which the nonhuman environment is present not simply as a framing device but as an active presence that reminds readers that human history is implicated in natural history (7). Dai's literary landscape fulfills this condition because human identity continually emerges through interaction with ecological surroundings. Her environmental consciousness is especially apparent in the prominence she gives to rivers. The river in Dai is simultaneously geographical reality, metaphorical presence, cultural memory, and spiritual force. Rivers connect settlements and generations while retaining memories beyond individual human lives. Their movement suggests continuity, but their vulnerability also evokes the instability produced by changing patterns of development and modernity. Dai's rivers resist human ownership. They existed before particular generations and will potentially continue beyond them, thereby challenging anthropocentric assumptions concerning human centrality. The river consequently becomes an ecological teacher, reminding humanity of its temporary place within larger environmental processes. Similar significance attaches to forests. In mainstream developmental discourse, forests are frequently reduced to measurable resources—timber, territory, minerals, or economic potential. Dai's writings contest this utilitarian reduction. The forest is a dwelling place shared by humans, animals, spirits, memories, and ancestral presences. It constitutes a cultural environment rather than an exploitable commodity. This distinction is central to indigenous environmental consciousness. As Graham Huggan and Helen Tiffin observe, postcolonial ecocriticism must recognize connections between environmental exploitation and histories of colonial domination. In Dai, threats to landscape are also threats to cultural autonomy because indigenous knowledge is embedded within specific environments. Destroying the forest therefore means more than removing trees; it disrupts stories, practices, rituals, identities, and relationships accumulated across generations. This ecological-cultural interconnectedness is powerfully developed in *The Legends of Pensam*. Published by Penguin Books India in 2006, the work brings together interconnected narratives rooted in the life and imagination of the Adi community. The term "Pensam" evokes an intermediate or liminal condition, and the book itself occupies a space between oral history and written literature, myth and modernity, memory and contemporary experience. The natural environment permeates its stories: forests, rivers, insects, rain, mountains, trees, and changing seasons participate continuously in the lives of the characters. The environment does not merely surround the community; it helps constitute the community's worldview. Dai's representation of indigenous life demonstrates that environmental knowledge is frequently preserved through narrative rather than abstract ecological

theory. Stories explain places, encode cultural memories, and transmit attitudes toward other forms of life. Oral tradition thus functions as a form of ecological archive. Dai's environmental consciousness is consequently also a consciousness of storytelling. When stories disappear, ecological knowledge associated with them may disappear as well. This connection between environmental preservation and cultural memory is one of the most important aspects of her work. The indigenous world represented by Dai often refuses a rigid division between animate and inanimate existence. Mountains, stones, rivers, animals, and forests may carry spiritual meanings or participate in networks of sacred relationships. Such representations can be understood in relation to what contemporary environmental humanities describe as challenges to anthropocentrism. Val Plumwood argues that Western traditions have frequently constructed hierarchical dualisms separating humanity from nature and privileging the former over the latter. Dai's indigenous cosmology destabilizes such hierarchical separation. Human beings exist within ecological networks rather than above them. Their survival depends upon respectful participation in those networks. The ethical implication is significant: if nature possesses presence, memory, or sacred value, exploitation becomes not merely environmentally destructive but morally problematic. Dai develops this ecological ethic without turning her literature into environmental propaganda. Her ecological consciousness emerges organically from images, stories, myths, landscapes, and memories. Her poetic language is frequently restrained and meditative. Rather than explicitly instructing readers to protect the environment, she creates imaginative situations in which ecological interdependence becomes perceptible. This aesthetic subtlety distinguishes literary environmental consciousness from direct activism while potentially making it equally powerful. Literature enables readers to experience environmental relationships affectively. Dai's landscapes evoke wonder, intimacy, anxiety, loss, and belonging, transforming ecological questions into questions of emotional and ethical responsibility. Her historical novel *The Black Hill* extends this environmental imagination into the context of nineteenth-century encounters between indigenous communities and colonial outsiders. The mountainous terrain of Arunachal Pradesh is integral to the novel's representation of movement, conflict, identity, and survival. Geography determines the possibilities of human action, while indigenous relationships with territory reveal forms of knowledge inaccessible to outsiders. Recent ecocritical scholarship on the novel has accordingly emphasized its sacred geography, ecological kinship, indigenous environmental knowledge, and resistance to extractive or imperial forms of power. The novel illustrates that territorial intrusion is simultaneously political and ecological because colonial movement transforms relationships among people, land, and authority. Dai's environmental consciousness is therefore inseparable from questions of power. Roads, external interventions, resource exploitation, and cultural intrusion potentially alter landscapes as well as social relationships. Yet Dai does not romanticize indigenous existence as an untouched ecological paradise. Her communities encounter violence, uncertainty, internal tensions, modernization, and historical transformation. This complexity prevents her environmental imagination from becoming simplistic nostalgia. Instead, she asks how indigenous ecological values might survive within changing historical circumstances. Her concern is not necessarily to reject modernity but to question forms of modernity that erase local knowledge and convert living environments into commodities. This tension between continuity and transformation gives her ecological writing much of its contemporary relevance. Environmental consciousness in Dai can also be understood through the idea of place. Ursula K. Heise distinguishes environmentally significant attachments to local place from broader conceptions of global ecological interconnectedness. Dai's writing begins emphatically with place: particular rivers, forests, hills, communities, myths, and memories. Yet this intense locality produces implications that extend far beyond Arunachal Pradesh. The environmental problems implicit in her writings—deforestation, displacement, developmental pressure, cultural erosion, and the marginalization of indigenous knowledge—are global concerns. Her literary regionalism therefore becomes a means of

articulating planetary environmental ethics. The more precisely she writes about a particular landscape, the more forcefully her work demonstrates the universal necessity of meaningful relationships with place. Another important dimension of Dai's environmental consciousness is the association between women, land, and memory. Female characters and poetic voices frequently participate in acts of remembering, storytelling, nurturing, mourning, and cultural transmission. Nevertheless, Dai avoids reducing women to stereotypical embodiments of nature. Instead, women often become witnesses to ecological and historical change. Their memories preserve intimate histories that official narratives may overlook. This connection provides an ecofeminist possibility without collapsing women and nature into an essentialist category. The significance lies in shared experiences of marginalization and in alternative forms of knowledge produced through everyday relationships with community and environment. Dai's work ultimately suggests that ecological crisis is also a crisis of perception. Environmental destruction becomes possible when humans cease to recognize forests, rivers, animals, and mountains as participants in shared existence and instead regard them solely as resources. Her indigenous environmental imagination offers a counter-epistemology based upon reciprocity and relationality. Such a worldview resonates with Aldo Leopold's influential land ethic, which enlarges the boundaries of moral community to include "soils, waters, plants, and animals" (204). Yet Dai's ecological ethics arise not from an imported environmental philosophy but from indigenous traditions in which such interconnectedness has long formed part of cultural knowledge. This distinction is crucial. Dai demonstrates that indigenous societies are not merely objects to be studied by contemporary environmentalism; they possess intellectual traditions capable of enriching global ecological thought. Environmental consciousness in Mamang Dai is therefore simultaneously literary, cultural, political, spiritual, and ethical. Her rivers and forests carry memories; her mountains participate in histories; her myths preserve environmental knowledge; and her indigenous communities reveal modes of belonging that challenge anthropocentric ideas of human superiority. Through poetry and fiction, she transforms the landscape of Arunachal Pradesh into a living ecological text. The importance of her work lies not only in representing the environmental richness of Northeast India but also in articulating an alternative philosophy of coexistence. At a historical moment marked by climate change, deforestation, biodiversity loss, displacement, and aggressive resource extraction, Dai's writing acquires particular significance. It reminds readers that environmental sustainability cannot be achieved solely through technological solutions or administrative policies. It also requires cultural memory, ethical responsibility, humility toward nonhuman life, and recognition of the intimate relationships connecting human communities to the places they inhabit. Mamang Dai's environmental consciousness finally asks humanity to recover an older yet urgently contemporary wisdom: the earth is not simply a territory occupied by human beings but a community of relationships within which human existence becomes possible.

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