The Context

Article

Mapping Indigeneity: Land, Memory and Belonging in Mamang Dai's *The Black Hill*

Rakesh Ghosh

English and Foreign Languages, Indira Gandhi National Tribal University, Amarkantak, India; itsrakeshghosh97@gmail.com

Abstract: This paper explores how Mamang Dai's *The Black Hill* (2014) brings forward the lived experiences and indigenous identity of the tribes of Arunachal Pradesh. Through its portrayal of land, women, community life, language, and storytelling, the novel shows how these elements shape the identity of these communities and how they relate to their world. The analysis looks at how land is tied to indigenous identity, how women sustain traditions, and how myths and stories help communities hold on to their sense of self. By focusing on these threads, the paper argues that *The Black Hill* is more than just a story of a place; it is a testament to the dignity and resilience of people whose histories are deeply connected to the land they live on. Mamang Dai's work serves as a reminder of the cultural richness of these communities and their rightful place within the larger landscape of Indian literature.

Introduction

The term 'indigeneity' originates from the Latin word 'indigena,' meaning "sprung from the land," which they (indigenous people) have occupied for an extended period. Etymologically, it means 'native'. Aborigines, native peoples, adivasis, and tribals are used as synonyms for this. The people of Northeast India, including the tribes (Adi, Mishmee) depicted by Mamang Dai, are among those who have historically been marginalised through social, political, and economic exclusion. This marginalisation has often resulted in loss of land, erosion of culture, and underdevelopment. Dai's *The Black*

Hill (2014) attempts to narrate this cultural resilience and continuity in the face of marginalisation by reclaiming the voices of her people, portraying how their traditions, beliefs, and customs form their identity.

This paper aims to:

- Examine the concept of indigeneity in *The Black Hill.*

- Analyse how land, language, stories, and community shape indigenous identity.

- Explore the representation of women and their role in sustaining cultural practices.

Research Methodology:

The present study uses a textual analysis as its primary method. It closely examines Dai's narrative, characters, descriptions, and references to indigenous customs, language, and landscape to illustrate the representation of indigeneity. The study employs theories of indigeneity and ethnicity for a detailed analysis of the novel, strictly adhering to the MLA 9th edition handbook for style.

What is Indigeneity?

Indigeneity refers to the condition and consciousness of being native to a land, to a place, rooted in a community's historical, cultural, and spiritual ties to its environment. It involves unique ways of living, storytelling, and preserving traditions that distinguish indigenous people from the dominant mainstream. Taking a closer look at the term 'indigeneity' reveals a complicated and dynamic construct that captures the tenacity, challenges, and aspirations of indigenous peoples all over the world.

Indigenous groups exhibit shared characteristics of resilience in the face of colonisation, land dispossession, cultural erasure, and marginalisation. The enduring challenges of indigenous communities in attaining self-determination and acknowledgment reverberate throughout successive generations, as they grapple with the delicate balance of safeguarding their cultural legacy amongst the pressures imposed by a swiftly evolving global landscape. The concept of 'Indigeneity' extends beyond a mere terminology, as it encapsulates a narrative that involves the continuous process of reconciling tradition and modernity, as well as heritage and innovation. Understanding 'indigeneity' is not merely an academic exercise; it carries profound implications for social justice, human rights, and cultural preservation. As we navigate the complexities of the modern era, acknowledging the significance of indigenous cultures and the challenges they face becomes paramount. The preservation of linguistic diversity, land rights, and the fostering of indigenous knowledge systems are crucial steps toward acknowledging the value of indigeneity in a world that is increasingly interconnected yet at risk of losing invaluable cultural treasures.

Oxford Learner's Dictionary defines 'indigenous' as, "coming from a particular place and having lived there for a long time before other people came there" ("Indigenous" *Oxford Learner's Dictionary*). To quote Jose R. Martinez Cobo, Rapporteur of the UN Sub-Commission on Prevention of Discrimination and Protection of

Minorities (1986), Catherine J. Iorns, in her article titled, *Indigenous Peoples and Self Determination: Challenging State Sovereignty* mentions:

Indigenous communities, peoples, and nations are those which, having a historical continuity with pre-invasion and pre-colonial societies that developed on their territories, consider themselves distinct from other sectors of the societies now prevailing on those territories, or parts of them. They form the present non-dominant sectors of society. They are determined to preserve, develop and transmit to future generations their ancestral territories, and their ethnic identity, as the basis of their continued existence as peoples, by their cultural patterns, social institutions and legal system... On an individual basis, an indigenous person belongs to those indigenous populations through self-identification as indigenous (group consciousness) and is recognized and accepted by these populations as one of their members (acceptance by the group). (Irons 199) Arpitha Kodiveri, in her article, has talked about indigeneity and has mentioned that "Indigeneity is a socially-constructed and politically contested term used by indigenous peoples to mobilize for rights over land and self-determination" (Kodiveri 235).

ILO (International Labour Organisation) in their General Policy, Article 1, talks about the 'indigenous people', who have descended "from the populations which inhabited the country, or a geographical region to which the country belongs, at the time of conquest or colonization or the establishment of present state boundaries and who, irrespective of their legal status, retain some or all of their own social, economic, cultural and political institutions" (ILO, Art. 1).

Taiaiake Alfred and Jeff Corntassel, in their article, *POLITICS OF IDENTITY - IX: Being Indigenous: Resurgences against Contemporary Colonialism,* talked about the 'indigenousness' of the 'indigenous people',

Indigenousness is an identity constructed, shaped, and lived in the politicized context of contemporary colonialism. The communities, clans, nations, and tribes we call Indigenous peoples are just that: Indigenous to the lands they inhabit, in contrast to and in contention with the colonial societies and states that have spread out from Europe and other centres of empire. It is this oppositional, place-based existence, along with the consciousness of being in struggle against the dispossessing and demeaning fact of colonization by foreign peoples, that fundamentally distinguishes Indigenous peoples from other peoples of the world. (Alfred & Corntassel 597)

The World Bank, in its Operational Directives (OD), talks about specific characteristics of the Indigenous peoples:

(a) A close attachment to ancestral territories and the natural resources in these areas;

(b) Self-identification and identification by others as members of a distinct cultural group.

(c) An indigenous language, often different from the national language;

(d) Primarily subsistence-oriented production. (World Bank 3)

In *Social Anthropology* (2006). Guenther says, "Indigenous is a term applied to people and by the people to themselves who are engaged in an often-desperate struggle for political rights, for land, for a place and space within a modern nation's economy and society. Identity and self-representation are vital elements of the political platform of such people" (Guenther et al. 17).

While discussing 'Indigeneity', Virginius Xaxa opines that:

> The term indigenous or its equivalent has been used in anthropology to describe groups called tribes for quite some time. Its use, however, has now gone beyond the discipline of anthropology... The term was used mainly as a mark of identification and differentiation, that is, to mark out a group of people different in physical features, language, religion, custom, social organisation, etc. (Xaxa 3590).

The notion of 'indigeneity' plays a crucial role in identifying numerous groups globally, establishing a connection between them and their ancestral territories, distinct cultures, and collective pasts. In the context of Northeast India, indigeneity is also inseparable from the land and the collective memory carried forward through myths, festivals, and language. Mamang Dai's narrative shows that indigeneity is not just an identity but a continuous act of remembering and resisting marginalisation.

Different Strands of Indigeneity:

There are different markers or signs of indigeneity, based on which the following primary texts have been analysed. Such markers are as follows -

Land:

Possession of land is central to the identity and survival of indigenous tribes. The forest, hills, and rivers are not mere resources but sacred inheritances. As Elwin (1958) noted:

> To him, the hills and forests are his. Again and again, it was said to me, 'These hills are ours; what right has anyone to interfere in our property?' . . . They have lived in these remote and inaccessible hills, racked by malaria, fighting a constant battle against wild beasts and unfriendly Nature, paying their state dues year after year and receiving nothing by way of public services in return. Yet, no rights or liberties are legally granted to them. (Elwin 17)

The land is not only an economic asset but a spiritual anchor. Its dispossession means uprooting communities from their history and identity.

Language:

One of the most important markers of indigeneity is embedded in language. Language holds the collective memory. Dai's text demonstrates how losing a language means losing a worldview. Ngugi wa Thiong'o reminds us, "Language is power. Language has the power to upset, uproot, and shackle... which may explain why post-colonial writing reveals the continuing struggle over the word. If you name the world,

you won it. If you are dominated, you see the world through the eyes of the conqueror, effectively burying your memory under the conqueror's memory" (Ngugi 41).

Clothing:

Clothing is another sensitive marker of indigeneity. Clothes are used to proclaim social rank and status. The tribes' men have their distinctive dresses, which are artistic and fitted to the conditions of their lives.

Position of Women, their Love, and Sexuality:

The position and status of women, their sexual orientation, and their ways of expressing love are not only personal but also essential to the identity and survival of many Indigenous communities. Women frequently serve as custodians of cultural knowledge, nurturers of traditions, and key participants in rituals and celebrations. Their interpersonal connections and demonstrations of affection are frequently regarded as vital for upholding social equilibrium and harmony within society. Moreover, the recognition and admiration of women's sexuality, which is frequently associated with fertility and the recurring patterns of life, emphasise a profound veneration for the natural world and its cycles. Understanding these facets helps us to comprehend better the ideals, principles, and customs that characterise Indigenous ways of life. As a result, women's roles, romantic relationships, and sexual orientation are essential indicators of Indigenous identity.

Textual Analysis of Mamang Dai's *The Black Hill* (2014)*:*

The Black Hill (2014) by Mamang Dai is a captivating novel set in the remote mountainous region of Arunachal Pradesh, India. It tells the intertwined stories of the Abor and Mishmee tribes, and a French priest during the 19th century. The novel explores themes of love, faith, and cultural clash amidst the backdrop of British colonialism. Through vivid descriptions and rich storytelling, Dai brings to life the mystical landscape and diverse traditions of the region. This novel was awarded the Sahitya Akademi Award in 2017. Her other noted literary works include *River Poems (2004), Midsummer: Survival Lyrics* (2014), the novel *The Legends of Pensam (2006)*, two stories for children – *The Sky Queen* (2003) and *Once Upon a Moontime (2003)*, *Arunachal Pradesh: Hidden Land (2003)*, all of which locate Arunachal Pradesh, formerly known as North East Frontier Agency (NEFA), and its tribes.

Mamang Dai's *The Black Hill* (2014) is a layered and evocative narrative that brings alive the world of the tribes of Arunachal Pradesh, whose stories have so often been overlooked in mainstream Indian literature. Through her narrative, Dai manages to root the reader in the sights, sounds, and pulse of a land where people and landscape are inextricably connected. This section explores how Dai represents indigeneity by weaving together themes of land, community, language, women's roles, myths, and oral storytelling — all of which are cornerstones of the tribal identity she voices.

Land as Inheritance and Identity:

Perhaps the strongest thread running through *The Black Hill* is the inescapable bond between the people and their land. Dai's tribes see land not simply as property

but as a living heritage. The forests, hills, rivers, and rocks are inseparable from their collective memory. Which Dai has nicely described as: "From this stream to the limits of the jungle and up to the hill with the white rock is my land, they said. Every piece of earth was claimed. The big trees, the high mountains, the rivers rushing down crevasses, the cliffs and jagged rocks" (Dai 70). This sense of attachment to land reverberates when Kajinsha remembers what his father told him, "If a man clears the forest and builds a house and harvests his fields, the land belongs to him" (112) — we understand that ownership here is not transactional but deeply rooted in toil, continuity, and belonging. This connection is spiritual as well as material, as when the shaman declares: "The land belongs to us. It is the soul of our ancestors" (ibid.).

Dai's descriptions show how fiercely the tribes hold on to this inheritance. The passage where the narrator explains how each stream, rock, and tree is claimed by memory and myth makes clear that for these communities, losing land means losing selfhood. This idea of land as identity runs through the conflicts in the novel, echoing the real-world struggles of many Northeast communities who have long resisted dispossession.

Nature as Presence, Not Backdrop:

One of Dai's great strengths is her ability to make the landscape a living participant in the story. Nature in *The Black Hill* is not just scenery; it listens, responds, and sometimes carries messages. In passages where Father Krick stops to listen to the wind whispering through the valley, or where Gimur talks to the moon, we see how nature forms an intimate part of the characters' inner lives. There is a lyrical softness in how Dai lets her characters draw strength and comfort from nature. For instance, when Gimur closes her eyes and asks the moonlight to "'Come, come to me', she said softly. 'Shine on my face. Enter my body, float in my blood, and settle in my heart like a golden swing. . . 'What are you doing?' 'I am talking to the moon, ' she replied" (4). We glimpse how the land and its rhythms shape the emotional world of her people.

Nature, for Dai's tribes, is teacher and witness. Its beauty and harshness both shape their resilience. Storms, floods, famine — these come not as abstract calamities but as reminders that nature, like people, holds both kindness and cruelty. This relationship with nature forms an important layer of indigenous identity that is rooted in coexistence, not conquest.

Women: Strength and Continuity

Gimur, the novel's central figure, is not only a woman navigating love, loss, and loyalty but also a symbol of how tribal women often carry forward community memory and resilience. Dai places Gimur at the heart of the narrative from the opening line, "A woman is standing on a hill…" (1), establishing her both as an individual and as a metaphor for the land itself. Despite living in a largely patriarchal world, women like Gimur are not passive. Her decision to leave Kajinsha when she feels betrayed shows her resolve and sense of self. She says to her child, "I do not need priests, of him Kajinsha. No one. What help can they offer me in my life? My life? I have strength too"

(152). There is quiet power in this declaration — she does not shout or wage open rebellion; her strength lies in her choice to walk away, to hold her dignity.

Dai's writing also shows how the social fabric allows women a space to exercise agency. From household work to rituals, from weaving to storytelling, women sustain the customs and shape how the next generation understands its place in the world. The *reshang*, or girls' dormitory, is not just a building but a space where young women learn community responsibilities and form bonds that reinforce solidarity.

Community: The Collective Self

In *The Black Hill*, no one stands alone. Tribal identity is bound to community life. Dai describes gatherings by the fire, village councils, the boys' dormitory (*mushup*), and the communal debates about how to resist colonial incursion. These scenes remind us that for the tribes, survival has always depended on collective action. The passage, "A fire draws people together, said the elders... (25) captures this sense beautifully. Stories are told, plans are made, and the light of these communal fires forges alliances. Dai's characters speak in "we" more than "I," showing how the individual merges into the clan and the land. When conflict threatens, this unity becomes the community's greatest defence. The declaration, "The British may conquer the whole world, but they will never take our land" (ibid.) is not bravado but an expression of faith in the power of solidarity. The people's stubbornness is not just about fighting soldiers; it is about defending an entire way of life.

Language: Keeper of Memory

In a region where histories were primarily oral for centuries, language becomes the keeper of stories, rituals, and beliefs. Dai understands this intimately and preserves it by embedding indigenous words — *Miglun, Donyi Polo, mushup, reshang* — within her English text. These words sit un-translated, gently insisting that the reader listen to a voice that does not seek permission to exist. Ngugi wa Thiong'o once wrote, "If you name the world, you own it" (Ngugi 41). Dai's use of local terms resists the erasure that comes when a dominant language tries to replace another. By allowing her characters to speak partly in their tongue, she makes the reader step into a world where identity is inseparable from language.

Myths and Stories: Voices That Endure

Dai's novel is filled with the murmurs of old stories. Myths swirl around the landscape: tales of spirits in rocks, children lost to the forest, and ancestral gods who walk in moonlight. Gimur's reflections remind us that for her people, stories are more than entertainment; they are memory. When Gimur thinks, "Tell them we were good. Tell them we also had some things to say. But we cannot read and write. So we tell the stories" (Dai 287). Here she speaks for all communities whose histories were never written down but live in whispers, songs, and fireside retellings. Dai's gentle insistence that stories matter is her way of giving voice to the marginalised. These stories become a counter-history, filling in the gaps left by colonial records that rarely noticed the everyday truths of the tribes they claimed to govern.

Memory and the Human Spirit

Towards the end of the novel, Gimur's thoughts linger on what will be remembered. She muses: "Tell them we were good. Tell them we also had some things to say" (ibid.). In these simple lines, Dai leaves us with her central idea- that the human spirit, rooted in land and memory, is not easily silenced. In *The Black Hill*, Mamang Dai does not offer a nostalgic fantasy of tribal life. She gives us the rough edges — storms, hunger, betrayal, loss — alongside tenderness and resilience. By doing so, she refuses to let these voices be simplified or forgotten.

Conclusion

This analysis contributes to the ongoing discourse on indigenous literature from Northeast India by foregrounding how Dai's work not only preserves cultural memory but actively engages in reclaiming indigenous identity within contemporary literary spaces. The strength of *The Black Hill* (2014) lies in its refusal to separate people from place. Dai writes the land as a living character; she writes the tribes as guardians of memory. Through Gimur, Kajinsha, and countless unnamed elders, Dai shows that the indigenous peoples are not silent; instead, they speak in stories, songs, language, and stubborn presence on the land. Her novel is an archive, a testimony, and above all, a reminder that as long as there is someone to tell the story, the story and the people endure.

Works cited

Alfred, Taiaike. & Corntassel, Jeff. "Being Indigenous: Resurgence against Contemporary Colonialism."

Politics of Identity – IX. Ed. Richard Bellamy. Blackwell Publishing, Oxford, 2005.

Dai, Mamang. *The Black Hill*. Aleph Book Company, 2014.

Elwin, Verrier. *Myths of the North East Frontier of India*. 1958.

Iorns, Catherine J. "Indigenous Peoples and Self Determination: Challenging State Sovereignty". *Case Western Reserve Journal of International Law*, vol. 24, no. 2, 1992. P. 199.

https://scholarlycommons.law.case.edu/jil/vol24/iss2/3/

Guenther, et al. "The Concept of Indigeneity". *Social Anthropology*, vol. 14, no. 1, 2006, pp. 17–32. doi:10.1017/S0964028205001849

International Labour Organization. "C169 - Indigenous and Tribal Peoples Convention, 1989 (No. 169)." Article 1, International Labour Organization,www.normlex.ilo.org/dyn/normlex/en/f?p=NORMLEXPUB:55:0::NO::P55_TYPE,P55 LANG,55_DOCUMENT,P55_NODE:REV,en,C169,/Document#A1

Kodiveri, Arpitha. "Being, Becoming and (Un) becoming Indigenous? Indigeneity, Human Rights and Climate Change in India." *Wisconsin International Law Journal*, vol. 38, no. 2, July 2018, p. 235.

World Bank. *Implementation of Operational Directive 4.20 on Indigenous Peoples: An Independent Desk Review*. Report No. 25332, 10 Jan. 2003, p. 3 https://documents1.worldbank.org/curated/en/570331468761746572/pdf/Impementaion-of Operational-Directive-4-20-on-Indigenous-Peoples-an independent desk review.pdf

Xaxa, Viginius. "Tribes as Indigenous People of India". *Economic and Political Weekly*, vol.. 34, no. 51, December 18, 1999, pp. 3589–3595.

Ngugi, Wa Thiong'o. "Homecoming Address." In Henry Indangasi and Masumi Odari (eds.). *The Nairobi Journal of Literature*, 2005, pp. 36 – 43.