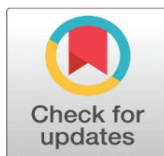
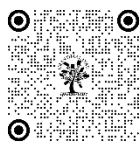


ECOLOGICAL CONSCIOUSNESS IN MAMANG DAI'S POETRY

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ABSTRACT

The intimate and intricate relationship between the indigenous communities of the Northeast and the natural world especially in the wake of modernity has often been a core concern in the poetry of almost all the North-Eastern poets, and Mamang Dai, an influential poet, novelist, and environmentalist from Arunachal Pradesh, India, is a no exception in this regard. Her lyrical, vivid and evocative portrayals of nature infuse an ecological consciousness that underscores harmony between human beings and the environment of the land. It is this ecological consciousness in Mamang Dai's poetry that this paper intends to explore, analyzing how her work reflects a deep sense of place, cultural identity, and environmental activism. By examining her key poems, the paper argues that Dai's poetry offers an alternative ecological vision rooted in indigenous knowledge systems, spirituality, and the profound interconnectedness of all living beings. In doing so, Mamang Dai's poetry not only contributes to the discourse of environmentalism but also challenges the anthropocentric narratives that often dominate contemporary ecological thought.

Keywords: Mamang Dai, Ecological Consciousness, Indigenous Knowledge, Nature, Environmentalism

1. INTRODUCTION

Ecological consciousness is the awareness and understanding of the interdependence of all life forms and the natural environment. The exploration of this consciousness have gained prominence with the rise of eco-critical approaches to literature. Glotfelty (1996) observes, "Ecocriticism (or by alternative names, environmental criticism and green studies) designates the critical writings which explore the relations between literature and the biological and physical environment, conducted with an acute awareness of the devastation being wrought on that environment by human activities." Similarly, Beyers (2005: 195) illustrates "Ecocriticism's response to our ongoing environmental catastrophe has been the pursuit of two goals: a canon of works modeling a proper attitude toward nature, and an interrogation of the ideologies that support environmental destruction". Being a victim of exploitation for centuries in the course of human history, women have always been more sensitive to exploitation and plunder. No wonder eco-criticism and eco-feminism developed almost simultaneously. Vandana Shiva (1988: xv) puts it succinctly, "Women, as victims of the violence of patriarchal forms of development, have risen against it to protect nature and preserve their survival and sustenance. Indian women have been in the forefront of ecological struggles to conserve forests, land and water. They have challenged the western concept of nature as an object of exploitation and have protected her as Prakriti, the living force that supports life." Mamang Dai, a prominent poet from Arunachal Pradesh, India, belongs to the indigenous community of the Nyishi, and her work is particularly significant for its vivid and intimate portrayals of the natural world.

Dai's poetry, rooted in the landscapes and cultures of Northeast India, provides a unique lens through which to examine ecological consciousness. Her works celebrate nature not as a backdrop to human activities but as a living, breathing entity with its own agency and power. Through her lyrical style, Dai foregrounds themes of ecological balance, respect for nature, and the critical role of indigenous knowledge in contemporary environmental activism. Through a thorough analysis of Mamang Dai's three poems viz. *The River*, *The Last Tree* and *The Seed*, this paper explores the role of her poetry in promoting ecological consciousness, focusing on how her works reflect indigenous wisdom and propose an ecological worldview based on interconnectedness, spirituality, and sustainable living.

2. MAMANG DAI AND THE LANDSCAPE OF ARUNACHAL PRADESH

Any exploration of the ecological consciousness in Mamang Dai's poetry requires a familiarization with the geographical and cultural context of Arunachal Pradesh, the region from which she hails. Often referred to as the "Land of the Rising Sun," Arunachal Pradesh is a biodiverse region, rich in flora and fauna, and home to various indigenous communities, each with its own unique relationship to the land. The diverse ethnic groups of the state, including the Nyishi, Apatani, and Mishmi, have maintained a deep connection to the natural world which is reflected in their myths, traditions, and daily practices. In these cultures, the environment is not seen as an external entity, but as an integrated part of human existence, and as a cultural product Dai's poetry is no exception. It is deeply informed by the cultural and ecological landscapes of this region and recognizes the natural world as a space of interconnectedness, where human beings, animals, and the elements are bound by invisible threads of reciprocity.

3. ANALYSIS AND FINDINGS

Through vivid imagery and an evocative portrayal of the river, Mamang Dai's poem *The River* engages with ecological concerns, particularly the connection between land, water, and culture, as well as the threats posed by human intervention. First of all, the river in Mamang Dai's poem is more than just a natural feature; it is presented as a sacred, life-giving force. The reverence the speaker shows for the river mirrors the way indigenous cultures perceive the natural world. The river is often imbued with spiritual significance, seen as a source of both physical sustenance and spiritual nourishment. In many indigenous cultures, rivers are not merely geographical entities but living beings with their own agency and importance. Through the speaker's relationship with the river, the poem emphasizes an eco-centric worldview, where nature is seen as sacred and worthy of protection, not merely a resource to be exploited. Second, Dai's poem underscores the deep interconnection between humans and nature as the river is not just a backdrop to human life but a central participant in the speaker's identity and community. The natural world—represented by the river—is integral to the rhythms of daily life, agriculture, culture, and survival. This portrayal reflects an ecological worldview where nature is not separate from human life, but is an active, dynamic participant in the community's well-being. The ecological consciousness in the poem is reflected in this interdependence, calling attention to the need for balance and harmony with the natural environment. Third, there is an implicit concern in the poem about the damage humans can cause to such a sacred entity. The poem hints at the environmental degradation that threatens the river's purity and flow. This degradation could be symbolic of larger environmental issues like pollution, deforestation, and unsustainable development. The sense of loss and the awareness of fragility within the poem are part of a larger ecological concern about how human activities are eroding the beauty and health of the natural world. This ecological anxiety suggests a future where the sacred river may lose its vitality, as human encroachment continues to disrupt natural systems. Fourth, there is an underlying theme of cultural and environmental loss that comes with ecological degradation. The river, as a symbol of cultural identity, is not just a physical body of water but a cultural landmark for the community. The threat to the river, therefore, is also a threat to the community's way of life, traditions, and beliefs. The poem speaks to the idea that environmental destruction also leads to the erosion of indigenous knowledge, culture, and identity. The degradation of the river can be seen as a metaphor for the loss of indigenous heritage and the displacement caused by modernization and industrialization. And finally, Dai's poem conveys a call to honor and protect the natural world, particularly water bodies like rivers that are so essential to life. By portraying the river as both a life-giving force and a sacred entity, the poem serves as a reminder of the need for ecological responsibility. It suggests that the destruction of natural elements not only harms the environment but also weakens human connections to the land, culture, and spiritual heritage. The ecological consciousness embedded in the poem is a subtle critique of human activities that prioritize short-term gain over long-term environmental sustainability, urging readers to reevaluate their relationship with the natural world.

Likewise, Mamang Dai's poem *The Last Tree* is a moving reflection on the themes of environmental destruction, human disregard for nature, and the loss of biodiversity. Specifically speaking, the "last tree" in Dai's poem stands as a powerful symbol of the natural world on the brink of collapse. Trees, in many cultures and ecological narratives, are emblematic of life, growth, and balance. By focusing on the "last" one, Dai draws attention to the stark reality of deforestation and the potential extinction of species and ecosystems. The tree, which has been a silent witness to the cycles of life, becomes a metaphor for the wider environmental crises humanity faces today where entire ecosystems are being destroyed, and that too with irreversible consequences. The last tree is not just the final physical entity, but also represents the fragility of nature's resilience in the face of relentless exploitation. Further, Dai's writing reflects an awareness of the fragility of ecosystems and the profound consequences of human activities like deforestation, which can lead to ecological imbalance and the collapse of vital natural systems. The loss of the last tree is not just the loss of a single organism; it symbolizes the collapse of an entire ecosystem. As trees are critical to maintaining biodiversity, their destruction has cascading effects on the flora and fauna that depend on them. The poem's focus on a singular tree invites readers to consider how species extinction and deforestation affect broader ecological health, threatening the balance of life. Next, Dai's poem also conveys an emotional response to the loss of the tree, which can be interpreted as a broader commentary on the collective grief felt by individuals and communities in the face of environmental degradation. The tree, in this sense, is not just a physical organism but a spiritual and emotional anchor for the people who live in its presence. The loss of the tree represents a deep sense of mourning—not just for a piece of the natural world, but for the loss of culture, identity, and tradition. Indigenous communities, in particular, often have a profound spiritual connection to nature, and the destruction of the environment is felt as a personal and cultural loss.

The last tree stands,
its roots buried in the earth of our ancestors.
It is not just a tree,
it is a memory of all that is lost.

The poem amplifies this grief, highlighting the personal and collective devastation that accompanies ecological destruction. In addition, the poem serves as a reminder of the urgency of ecological conservation. By focusing on the fate of the last tree, Dai brings attention to the rapid depletion of natural resources and the dire need for action to protect the environment. The tone of the poem suggests a finality and a sense of urgency, as if the reader is being asked to confront the reality of the situation before it is too late. Through this stark imagery, Dai conveys a call for ecological awareness, urging individuals and society to reflect on their environmental impact and take responsibility for safeguarding the planet's remaining natural resources.

Next, in her poem *The Seed* Mamang Dai explores the interconnectedness of nature and humanity, highlighting both the nurturing qualities of nature and the destructive forces that threaten it. In the poem, the seed represents the potential for new life, growth, and renewal. It is a symbol of hope, resilience, and the cycle of nature. The seed, in its smallest form, carries within it the promise of transformation, emphasizing the natural world's ability to regenerate and provide sustenance. This idea reflects a deep ecological consciousness that recognizes the cycles of life in nature, where every element, no matter how small, plays a role in maintaining ecological balance. Dai's choice of the seed as a central symbol also highlights the fragility and importance of biodiversity, as the seed represents not only the future of individual plants but also the broader ecosystems they are part of. While the seed symbolizes life and growth, it also implicitly represents vulnerability. The potential for the seed to grow and thrive is contingent on an environment that is healthy and supportive. The poem's portrayal of the seed may hint at the environmental degradation that threatens this potential. Deforestation, pollution, and climate change could be seen as external forces that hinder the seed's ability to grow, much like how human activities endanger ecosystems. This connection draws attention to the ways in which human actions, such as unsustainable farming practices or urbanization, disrupt natural processes and threaten the balance required for growth and regeneration. Further, Dai's poem emphasizes the idea of mutual dependence between humans and nature, suggesting that human survival and well-being are inextricably tied to the health of the natural world. The seed requires the right conditions to grow—nurturing soil, water, sunlight, and care. Similarly, human communities rely on nature for their sustenance. The act of planting or protecting the seed becomes an act of stewardship, underscoring the responsibility humans have to protect the environment. Chandra and Das (2007: 36) observe, "Ecological erosion is of deep concern for the poetess and through her awareness of these erosions, she is visionary of a new world of ecology with planted green seedlings". Obviously, the seed's survival and growth depend on careful attention, just as ecosystems depend on human care to avoid destruction. This reflects an ecological consciousness that stresses the importance of

living in harmony with the natural world. Still further, in Dai's poem, the seed may be viewed as a metaphor for cultural survival, carrying within it the wisdom of generations. The careful nurturing of the seed reflects the care taken to preserve indigenous ways of life, knowledge systems, and ecological practices that are intimately connected to the land. The ecological consciousness in this context is tied to the preservation of both the environment and cultural heritage, recognizing that they are inseparable. And finally, the poem also highlights the delicate balance in nature, where a small seed can either grow into something vibrant or wither away. This fragility reflects broader ecological concerns about the ease with which ecosystems can be damaged by human intervention. The seed's vulnerability mirrors the vulnerability of ecosystems and species facing extinction due to human-induced climate change, deforestation, and other forms of environmental harm. Dai's poem evokes an awareness of how easily life can be disrupted, and the responsibility humans have in protecting the natural world from further harm.

The above discussion is indicative that Mamang Dai's poetry is a powerful manifestation of ecological consciousness, one that is deeply informed by her indigenous heritage and the landscapes of Arunachal Pradesh. Through her lyrical portrayals of nature, her critique of environmental destruction, and her celebration of indigenous knowledge, Dai offers a unique perspective on the human-nature relationship. Her poetry invites readers to reflect on the interconnectedness of all life forms and to reconsider their role in the preservation of the natural world. As climate change and environmental degradation continue to pose global challenges, Mamang Dai's work serves as a timely reminder of the wisdom that can be gleaned from indigenous cultures and the need for a more sustainable and harmonious way of living with the Earth.

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CONFLICT OF INTEREST

None.

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