

The Transience of Human life and the eternity of rituals: Mamang Dai's Small Towns and the River

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Abstract: One of the strongest voices from the North-east Mamang Dai is a famous poet and novelist from Adi Tribal Community representing the indigenous, disappearing culture and customs. Dai's poetry is the poetry of landscape—rivers, mountains, the flash of summer, starry skies, and incessant rain form central motifs in almost all her poems. Nature here is mysterious, verdant with myth and dense with sacred memory. Amidst the delightful portrayal of beautiful landscape with facile, fluid lyricism, the poetess upholds the theme of human mortality, temporary and ephemeral nature of human life, the continuous cycle of life and death and contrasts it with the permanence of 'Nature'. The strength of the poetry is its unforced clarity, its ability to steer calm of easy flamboyance. In her poem "Small Towns and The River", (River Poems, 2004) Padmashri Mamang Dai—a true born literary artist of Arunachal Pradesh, voice of modern women writers of Indian writing English contrasts the Perishability of human life with the Permanence of rituals and Nature.

Keywords: Perishability, boredom, inertia, folk culture, rituals and traditions, myths.

INTRODUCTION:

Mamang Dai is a renowned poet and Novelist from Pashighat, East Siang District, North-East India, Arunachal Pradesh. Alongside her intensely poetic voices, she worked with WWF in the eastern Himalaya Bio-diversity Hotspot programme; she was member of NEWE (North-East Writers' Forum); member of APPSC and the president of APUWJ (Arunachal Pradesh Union of Working Journalist). His first published poetry collection was— "River Poems". In 2003, Dai received the state's Verrier Elwin Award for her book *Arunachal Pradesh— The Hidden Land*, that documented the culture and customs of the state. Her other books include *The Legends of Pensam Stupid Cupid*, *El balsam del tiempo— The balm of time* (a bilingual poetry volume), *Mountain Harvest— The Food of Arunachal*. She was awarded the Padma Shri in 2011 for her contribution in the field of literature and education.

Neo-romanticist Mamang Dai's poetic world is of river, mountain, forest, a limpid and lyrical reflection of the terrain of her home state—Arunachal Pradesh (Sanskrit meaning—"The Land of Dawn-lit Mountains"). Dai's poetry is the poetry of Landscape. Nature here is mysterious, verdant with myth and dense with sacred memory. Amidst the delightful portrayal of beautiful landscape with facile, fluid lyricism, the poetess upholds the theme of human mortality, temporary and ephemeral nature of human life, the continuous cycle of life and death and contrasts it with the permanence of 'Nature'.

Transience of human life Vs Permanence of rituals:

In her poem "Small Towns and The River", (River Poems, 2004) Padmashri Mamang Dai—a true born literary artist of Arunachal Pradesh, voice of modern women writers (from Adi community) of Indian writing English contrasts the perishability of human life with the permanence of rituals and Nature. Dai's poetry is the poetry of landscape. Mamang Dai's poetic world is of river, mountain, forest, a limpid, and lyrical reflection of the terrain of her home state—Arunachal Pradesh. Nature here is mysterious, verdant with myth and dense with sacred memory. Amidst the delightful portrayal of beautiful landscape with facile lyricism, the poet-speaker says that small towns create in her an impression of 'death'. In deeper connotation, 'death' seems to be synonymous with boredom, inertia and devoid of the autonomous enjoyment of life and lack of vivacity and life-spontaneity or 'death' means the place devoid of trees— *a sense of claustrophobia*. In the very next stanza, the poetess' very mention of 'death' at important junctures in her poems makes us aware that the poet wants to draw attention to issues beyond the obvious picture. Protest, the contemporary reality of violence (between the 'northeast' and mainstream central Govt. of India, between the indigenous natives and the migrants) and bloodshed (between the insurgents and the central army) are not divorced in Dai's poetic sensibility. This is conveyed in the poem—"Just the other day someone died" [many critics argue it as the death of poet's mother's sister]. This expression makes it appear that as if such deaths due to insurgency are very common. The power of the poem is its unforced clarity. Then there pervades an ambience of "fearful quietude". Instead of the individual event, importance is placed on communal aspect [reflected by 'we']. More than the details about the dead, it is the communal method of grieving that strikes the poet because of its lack of feeling. 'Dreadful silence' may also refer to curfews after such insurgency. Garlands made of Tuberoses (messenger of death) are decked on the dead that reminds the poet about mortality. 'Death is inevitable, irrevocable—impossible to aloof from its deadly clutches. Death triumphs over 'life' and makes the relatives of the deceased helpless and puppet of circumstance. The next two lines reflect the continuous cycle of 'life' and 'death' ordained by Supremo. The human life is temporary and ephemeral. Just like Wordsworth, the Adi tribe believed in the *philosophy of Pantheism*. [All is God, God is all]. They worshipped all the natural elements. Dai herself confessed that for her Nature is "*a living presence*" with which one can connect and empathise. As 'West Wind' spreads Shelley's romantic spirit and revolutionary fervour, similarly

Dai's 'River' (Siang River) adds vigour, rhythm and essence amidst stagnant human life in her small town. The tribal belief in animism seems as a philosophical framework for Dai's poetry— "The River has a soul". In summer, it flows through the land. She uses the metaphor of "torrent of grief" to portray the river's course in dry season. The world of Nature also responds to the happenings of human world. Due to insurgency the pain and sufferings in the human world is echoed in the natural world by river which cuts through land "like a torrent of grief". The erosion of culture and tradition in northeast also saddens and thus "holds its breath" and seeks a land of fish and stars. It refers to the river's desire to escape into mythical land—primordial pure world. It is an allusion to the Australian Aborigine's 'Dreamtime'. The river knows the first drop of rain that rejuvenates the dry earth and the mist on the mountaintops that shrouds the mountain. As P.B Shelley's West Wind is 'destroyer and preserver', similarly Dai's 'River' is *symbol of primitive Knowledge and onlooker of earthly activities*. 'River' here is the essence of all 'living being' [synecdoche]. The incessant flowing of the river may be compared to human life. Human life is not permanent— it is perishable but the poetic river holds the "immortality of water". In the poem, the reiteration of the river's soul co-exists with a mounting sense of human anxiety, leading the reader to an unexpected close—"In small towns by the river/ We all want to walk with the gods". The thematic clash between permanence and transience adds to the tone of overall anxiety and tension.

It is a juxtaposition of transience of human life with permanence of nature and folk culture/ traditions. North-east is the mosaic of tribal rituals and beliefs—passing down orally from one generation to another since time immemorial. The poet mentions the ritual of placing the dead with their head pointing westwards so that when their soul rises (myth) it would go towards the " golden east" i.e. Heaven (the house of Donyi-Polo). [The mention of myth is an element of neo-romanticism]. However, the poet expresses a feeling of anxiety because these perennial rituals and traditions are threatened by the so-called neo-colonialist, influenced and educated by the manners of colonisers tries to dominate/endow their culture upon the native's autonomous culture. The poet tries to secure these inherited cultures from the striking blow of great annihilator 'Time'. The poet constraints the transient and ephemeral nature of human life with the permanence of traditionally inherent rituals and myths.

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