

## Bioregional Ecospirituality in Mamang Dai's Fiction

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### Abstract

Mamang Dai, the ecochronicler from Arunachal Pradesh, upholds a profound sense of mysterious ecology, pristine animism and the spiritual faith of her tribe in her ecofictional narratives. A bioregionalist, she has deftly explored and depicted the bioregional realities of reinhabitation, the plethora of tribal gods, the tribal rituals, fellow feeling, the biome and the spiritual landscape and the traditional sense of sustainability amidst the modern incursions. The existence of evil in numerous forms and the need to appease the evils for a blessed life is the traditional mode of tribal living. The living in the hills and valleys must be in consonance with the environment. The watershed, the rivers, the brooks, the myriad vegetation and colourful surrounding in the territory with its resounding rhythm of life have been pigmented by the bioregional vision of the ecofictionist in her novels titled *The Legends of Pensam*, *The Black Hill* and *Escaping the Land* which the present essay tries explore.

**Keywords:** Biological Realism, Reinhabitation, Bioregional Living, Ecospirituality, Donyi-Polo

### 1.0 Introduction

The roots of bioregion lie in the biomes and the biome system of classification. The biomes are natural habitats like grassland, deserts, rainforests, coniferous forests, soil, vegetation, and animal life developed in each climatic region in consonance with rainfall, temperature, weather patterns and the like. The bioregion is the biological realism with its associated features. Peter Berg depicts a bioregion as a geographical terrain and beyond it a terrain of consciousness. (Merchant 2005: 237). Besides the geopolitics, the sense of the place and the imagination and reimagination of the place, the archetype of the place, the folk narratives, personal experience of living in this earth, geography of climate, passions and place are essential aspects of the bioregional imagination (Vandervlist 2012:154). The place-based epistemology like

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understanding of self, community and world, the ecological history, contemporary environmental degradation, the dichotomy of the civilized and the wild, civics and agriculture, cultural and spiritual history and the like are some of the extended features of bioregional imagination (Bladow 2012: 405-406 &408). Bioregionalism is “a delineation of place in terms of a bioregion, which reflects properties of the natural world rather than human artifice; a holistic integration of the individual person with that bioregion; and the interconnectedness of physical world, human psychology, and spirituality. Bioregional literary criticism, ... is characterized by the drive “to identify and understand the niche of writers in their bioregional habitat”” (Barnhill 2012:212). Again Libby Robin writes, “A bioregion is just physical, beyond the human world...Place-conscious thinkers are left to find words other than “bioregion” to talk about the humanity of place” (ibid. 2012: 282-83). Paul Lindholdt says, “bioregionalism is more than mere philosophy or pedantry, more than some theory nice to contemplate. It truly gets us where we live. It teaches us the means by which we can reinvestigate our living regions and reinvest ourselves” (cited in Cusick 2012: 139). Besides that, “Different bioregions look, smell, taste, sound, and feel different. We sense the transition between bioregions with our whole bodies” (Lynch, et al 2012:5).

### 1.1 Ecospirituality

Amidst the bioregional diversity, there exists a culture of spirituality, which is an understanding of human souls with the place, to which every human is obedient and without which life becomes intolerable, may be impossible. The bioregion is wonderful and the creation is a wonder and in our lives we celebrate this wonder and we need to be humble to this wonder. Matthew T. Fox, a Roman Catholic priest and professor of Religious Education, who defines a concept of Creation Spirituality/ Ecological Spirituality drawing on earlier Christian scholars like Meister Eckhart, Hildegard of Bingen, Francis of Assisi and Julian of Norwich, reintroduces a religious experience basing on a sense of sacred that begins with a sense of awe and wonder including a sense of unconditional love and delight. This sense of sacred with the sense of awe and wonder prevails in the tribal religion also which in the present essay has been considered as ‘Bioregional Ecospirituality’. Fox proposes four paths to this ecospirituality/ spiritual ecology: (i) The first is to experience the Divine through delight, awe and wonder living in this world which involves the intuition that the creation is a blessing and response to gratitude (*Via Positiva*), (ii) experiencing darkness, deprivation, suffering and pain (*Via Negativa*), (iii) rebirth of creativity through the first two paths (*Via Creativa*) which involves identifying new ecological virtues for living like vegetarianism, recycling, relearning the sacredness of nature, defending creation through political action and making new rituals to celebrate sacred places, times, and being in nature, and (iv) transformation to a more compassionate society for mutual love and making of justice (*Via Transformativa*) (Fox 1998: 228). In the present paper, the tribal bioregion of Arunachal Pradesh, along with the ancient placelore of the Adi, Mishmi and Abor (Abor is the earlier designation of the Adi and is used in the novel to refer to the past time) tribes, the idea of evil among the tribes and their tradition of appeasing the evils for living in their land is essential and the advent of new religion and alien culture and the tribals’ encounter with the same and subsequent metamorphosis in the landscape and the tribal ways of making justice have been dilated.

## 1.2 Mamang Dai's Ecofiction, Bioregionality, and Bioethics

Mamang Dai is an ecofictionist, ecohistorian and cultural chronicler of Arunachal Pradesh. Hailing from Adi tribal community, she has explored the precolonial and colonial history of the land of her birth and reimagined the community life in her novels, viz., *The Legends of Pensam*, *The Black Hill*, and *Escaping the Land*, which are true bioregional narratives that uphold the significant bioregional aspects. Whereas *The Legends of Pensam* is about the habitat of the Adi tribe, their culture, spirituality, their folk traditions and some community legends amidst the changing times from the immemorial past to the modern colonial times, *The Black Hill* explores the Mishmi, Abor and Tibetan habitats, placelore, culture, and life along with the British colonial aggression, the adventure of a French missionary, Father Nicholas Krick and personal life and tragedy of the Abor-Mishmi couple of Gimur and Kajinsha. *Escaping the Land* traces an unforgettable journey from the land of Kojum-Koja, a sacred place beyond time to the formation of the modern province of Arunachal Pradesh. In the three novels, besides the bioregion, the spirituality innate with the tribes and their cultural lives has been depicted. History and legends have been blended with the place and placelore and the fictionist's personal tours to the different corners of the land to reinhabit the past and present and interweave the same to the bioregion. *The Legends of Pensam* highlights the alien incursion into the land and degradation of biome and the rapidly changing face of the environment which has been an acute anguish with the tribes of Arunachal Pradesh.

In *The Legends of Pensam*, the bioregion of Arunachal Pradesh has been depicted in a mosaic in different chapters. Homeland of twenty-six tribes with more than one hundred and ten sub-clans, this bioregion is a part of the Eastern Himalaya, criss-crossed by rivers and high mountain ranges running north-south dividing the region into five river valleys (Dai 2006: xi). Beyond the line of hills, there is a great river in a great loop of water which thunders through a deep gorge almost unseen and always covered in clouds of mist and vapour (ibid.: 99). With the advent of the colonisers, the wilderness and the wild topography metamorphed into roads, buildings, and new habitations. Then came the thunder of cargo trucks and bulldozers, the shouts of men and “the jungle burst into flame as mountain tops were blown off and the labour force struggled to claw their way through the rubble and drag the wretched road across the mutilated hills” (ibid.: 40). Again there is description of the mysterious Stillwell road which “went up mountains, plunged into gorges and spanned ten rivers and hundreds of streams” (ibid.). In *The Black Hill*, there are depictions of the Mishmee Hills, Dau River (Dai 2014: 6), other swiftly flowing rivers, snow-capped mountains, wooded slopes of trees, conifers, rainforests (ibid.: 74), thick forests of pine, cultivated fields and fruit trees (ibid.: 79), separate spots for hunting, fishing and catching rodents and birds, forest land (ibid.: 81), wilderness of blocks of granite (ibid.: 93), open stretch of land with clear streams and forests of reed bamboo, rhododendron and dark swathes of pine forest covering the high peaks, snow-covered passes and frozen lakes, the territory of wolves, of the snow leopard, the musk deer and the heavy, surefooted *mishmee takin*, grazing ground (ibid.: 112) and lakes, watersheds and varieties of trees. The tribes consider the land as a book (140). They also say, “We belong to the land. The land is a good mother. I take only what I need. Animals and trees offer themselves. We help each other survive” (ibid.: 141).

In the bioregion/ biome, there resides so many spirits/ evils and gods. Appeasing evils is of utmost importance failing which life will be unbearable and it will be difficult on the part of

each tribe and hence they invite their *miri* to perform rituals to appease the evils/ spirits. The legends relating to appeasing the evils/ spirits sprang out of the consciousness and experience of man. Regarding this consciousness and evolution of consciousness, the shaman narrates:

“In the beginning, there was only Keyum. Nothingness. It was neither darkness nor light, nor had it any colour, shape or movement. Keyum is the remote past, way beyond the reach of our senses. It is the place of ancient things from where no answer is received. Out of this place of great stillness, the first flicker of thought began to shine like a light in the soul of man. It became a shimmering trail, took shape and expanded and became the Pathway. Out of this nebulous zone, a spark was born that was the light of imagination. The spark grew into a shining stream that was the consciousness of man, and from this all the stories of the world and all its creatures came into being” (Dai 2006: 56).

The almighty Donyi-polo, the sun and moon, is the invisible force which guides every one of the tribal communities. Again there are a host of evils/ spirit, the rituals of pacification which have been narrated in *The Legends of Pensam* (op cit.). Biribik, the Water Serpent, Mitimili, Dimitayang, Danki, the Python Spirit, the Tiger/ Fire Spirit, and *Si-ye* are some of the supernatural evils. Besides these, there are some physical evils which reside in hunting accidents, and elements of nature like wind, river, treacherous paths, and trees. Some black moments also enter the human soul and cause murders. There are some symbolic good and evil like the tooth of a tiger and a wild bear which are symbols of luck and success. The aubergine plant growing into a size of a tree with poisonous looking flowers and long bloated fruit creates psychopathic behaviour in people who come under them; women lingering by streams and rivers after sunset are ominous and even some people are also auspicious/ inauspicious. The rapid changes brought during the modern times creating inconvenience, outsiders, thieves and diseases are also evils. The cutting of trees, wild rivers and mountains, the wind and scorching sun due to ecological disaster are also evils. The magical and mysterious wind, places, big trees, rivers and streams are also mysterious evils (Das 2012: 70-77). In *The Black Hill* (op cit.) the forms of evils like women wading across rivers/ streams at night (ibid.: 64), the loud cry of an unseen bird (ibid.: 76), *Ksha*-ghosts (ibid.: 77), birth of twins (ibid.: 85), strange birds (ibid.: 86), certain stones (ibid.: 127), outsiders (ibid.: 148), the *uyus*, evil spirit (ibid.: 171 & 91), and the fire demon (ibid.: 188) are depicted (*also see* Das 2020:12). For appeasing these evils/ spirits, rituals are performed as prescribed by the *miri/ Nyibu*. Sometimes, the *miri* invokes the spirits and prays them to forgive, sometimes the *miri* tells the stories to the patient listeners and sometimes also the *miri* performs rituals chanting and negotiating with the spirits to restore the sick (Dai 2006: 24) and thus he constantly performs to appease the spirits to get rid of the evils.

### 1.3 The World of Spirits, Gods and Modes of their Appeasement

The Adis believe that the life a man is measured by his actions and if their origin of the actions is pure, then his actions will be good. The presence of evil is unavoidable and unpredictable. Hence every human must be cautious and must pacify these evils for a safe and smooth driving of his life. In *The Legends of Pensam* (op.cit) amidst the numerous evils, the supernatural evils have been described and their aspects have been narrated suggesting their appeasements to get rid of difficulties ensuing out of their wrath:

**Biribik:** It is a water serpent. On a night of heavy rain, a fisherman who was all alone with his nets by the river and was sheltering under a tree, heard a rushing sound and when he looked up, saw a serpent with a head with horns coiled up in the branches of the tree and looking down at him. Being extremely frightened, he ran for his life and thereafter fell sick and never recovered from the effects of that terrible vision and died within a year of wasting illness. Hoxo's father had also seen this serpent, *Biribik*. The myth of *Biribik* is fixed in the collective memory (ibid.: 9).

**Si-ye:** This is the yeast which is used to ferment rice into beer. It has special and miraculous power and should be handled with respect. It is believed that there is a bad spirit lurking in this yeast which makes men go mad after eating the cakes made out of *si-ye*, rice powder and ground nuts. Hence, consumption of *si-ye* cakes is forbidden before a hunt and journey (ibid.: 29).

**Mitimili:** This is a race of supernatural beings. They are small and quiet and they are the ones who first prepared the mysterious *si-ye* that is used to ferment rice into beer. This race of people disappeared being deranged by strange visions. They gave this sacred powder to mankind cautioning that this white powder should be handled with respect by women only. This powder mixed with ground rice, roots, and berries, is made into small flat biscuits called *si-ye* cakes, which when consumed make people hallucinate like *mitimili* race and hence need to be handled respectfully at the time of necessity only (ibid.: 28-29).

**Dimitayang:** It is the lonely spirit which stirs up the lake waters and clutches the trespassing people in an embrace of ice. During winter, Adis set out on a journey to the Snow Mountains to harvest some precious roots for preparation of poison arrows. After collection and packing of the roots, they address the mountains and the air turning in every direction and bid them farewell with promises to visit again. They convince the jealous spirits to allow them safe return. Despite all prayers, once a group of Adis had to face the wrath of *Dimitayang* in the shape of a strong cyclonic wind, dust, and cloud. After the cyclonic danger subsided and they reached home, they found a dead preying mantis, which they took to be the evil spirit and performed rituals to ward off the danger (ibid.: 59).

**Danki:** The Lotang family of Migu clan owned a fabulous vessel called *Danki*, made of the strongest metal alloy and it was believed that the vessel was an auspicious gift from the gods. It was handed down from generation to generation by the Lotang family. But one day it was noticed that the vessel was lying overturned and there was moisture on it and patches of moss on its surface. After they cleaned it, again it was found next day filled with bamboo leaves of the variety available on far north hills. Again, another day it was found split into two halves and finally it disappeared. With its disappearance, the fortune of the Migu clan declined and finally the whole clan disappeared (ibid.: 62-63).

**Python Spirit:** If anybody kills a python, the python spirit takes revenge. Kepi, son of KaryonTogum family of Yabgo village was suffering from fever for long and after all kinds of treatment his condition was still not improving. The child was crying and his small torso twisted stiff and unmoving. Finally, Togum being advised by someone called Hoxo, the Nyibu for performing a special ceremony to appease the snake spirit. The Nyibu narrated from his vision

during the ceremony about how Togum killed a python in the timber depot in the middle of the forest. While the elephant which was drawing the logs stopped seeing the python, Togum who did not have any experience of hunting killed the python with two gunshots. Hoxo had to perform the serpent ritual whole night chanting and negotiating with the spirits, calling them to restore the sick child. The Nyibu narrated that the python spirits are the deadliest ones and they move away and never return (ibid.: 24).

**Tiger/Fire Spirit:** The fire in burning down of a house is caused by the Fire/Tiger spirit. Pinyar, the widow who was deserted by Orka, her first lover, and whose husband Lekon died in a hunting accident, was living all alone. Once her house caught fire and everything turned into ashes. As per the tradition, she was banished to the outskirts of the village and had to undergo the taboo and none was visiting her in fear of provoking the Tiger/ Fire spirit. Once in Duyang village, the angry fire spirit completely gutted twenty houses and the village had to perform special rituals to propitiate the fire spirit. The angry fire spirit causes immense harm. Fire watching is a sacred duty and all young men are expected to give their time and keep vigil throughout the night in their dormitory to watch the fire (ibid.: 121-122).

**Black moments:** Sometimes an evil spirit trades human soul and makes him mad. Kamur, the son of Pinyar from Orka, one afternoon, suddenly, killed his infant daughter with a sword and started chasing his wife holding the bloodied sword. When she screamed and the neighbours came out, he realised what happened and dropping the sword, he fell to ground blubbering and weeping. He could not recollect what happened to him. These are some black moments that make the humans mad and commit crime (ibid.: 30). Pinyar was worried for her son and was saying she would fetch all the powerful priests from across the river to drive away the spirits that had taken possession of her son (ibid.: 34). High mountains, dense forests full of wild animals, poisonous snakes, and insects, rivers, streams, gorges, and intense valleys proved the land a difficult terrain, and its people wild and innocent. The people believed that everything has a soul and the spirits, if not propitiated would harm them. Beyond that, elements of nature like wind, water, fire, sky, and space have spirits which avenge humans. The wild ginger is a potent medicine against the evil spirits. A piece of wild ginger is tied around the necks of young children to ward off illness and always carried out of sheer habit by a person while travelling. (ibid.: 94). The tooth of a tiger and wild boar are symbols of luck and success (ibid.:35).

The Adi, Abor and Mishmi tribes are humble to their surrounding bioregion and they live in close relationship with the nature. For them “Faith is everything” (ibid.:35). Invoking the spirits and speaking to them is an example of experiencing the Divine through delight, awe and wonder, which is the first path of ecospirituality (*Via Positiva*) and it also involves promoting self-control like not to “laugh loudly” (Dai 2014:157). Suffering the rage of the spirit/ evil is the second path to ecospirituality (*Via Negativa*). Appeasing the spirit to evade the evil through performance of the rituals, invoking the spirits and negotiating with it, dancing and listening the glory of the spirits and the Holy Light from the miri to bow in obeisance to spirit is the third path to ecospirituality (*Via Creativa*) which also involves relearning the sacredness of nature, making new rituals and defending creation through political action. Observance of the afore-mentioned ways of ecospirituality results in transformation to a more compassionate society and making of justice (*Via Transformativa*). Praying in mass for common greater cause is the example of this path to ecospirituality. The omniscient narrator in *The Black Hills* says:

“The village miri performed rituals. ...No house was safe and every day some ritual was performed by a household to ward off disease and death. People gathered together and women bent their heads and chanted with the miri. But for Gimur there was no one in the house to ask for rituals. ...She listened to the chanting echoing all around her and watched the women of the village joined together in prayer” (ibid.: 171).

The biome and the whole of the bioregion are integral to the ecospirituality. There are numerous examples of virtues, and the placelore and folklore are replete with such virtues by observance of which the difficulties of life can be eased. Hence rituals are essential. The prayers are powerful in resolving the grief, pain and difficulties of life. Hence Gimur in *The Black Hill* asserts:

“I know about prayer. I have prayed all my life. Since the day I was born I have been moving from ritual to ritual. The miri says we came from a land beyond the skies. It is there we will return when we die.... Every prayer, every ritual is a knot. This is the way we measure time. But all the prayers and rituals will not erase what has happened. This is fixed forever as another knot in my life” (ibid.: 171-72).

Again the shaman explains:

“Our purpose is to fulfil our destiny. The life of a man is measured by his actions and his actions are good if their origin is pure. From nothingness we have come to be born under the stars, and almighty Donyi-polo, the sun and the moon, whose light shines on all equally, is the invisible force that guides each one of us. All life is light and shadow; we live and we die, and the path of destiny is the quest of faith” (Dai 2006: 56-7).

In *Escaping the Land* (2021), Mamang is introducing another spirit called “Banji spirit, the dark spirit of water” that drowned Lutor’s son in whirlpool. (Dai 2021:76). Here the holy land of Kojum-Koja has been reexplored to mere love of the land stating how the land is our strength: “If everything depends on yourself then what better place to make a life than the place where you were born? Everywhere people love their land. It is life, birth, happiness, and children. It is our source of strength and our inspiration. It is life” (ibid.: 82). “Before everything else there was the land of Kojum-Koja, a sacred place beyond the moon and stars. This was the first civilization from where man began his journey through the different heavens to descend into world carrying stories of happiness and hope” (ibid.: 2021:90).

#### 1.4 Conclusion

The three bioregional narratives of Mamang Dai present the interconnectedness of physical world, human psychology, and spirituality. These also justify that the very essence of bioregionalism and ecospirituality uphold values and realities which are more significant than philosophy and pedantry. The narratives also provide means to reinvestigate our living regions and reinvest ourselves and make holistic integration of individual with the bioregion. The bioregion is our destiny. We sprout from here, grow here and get buried here, and thus mingle into the biome. This is our beginning and end. Ecospirituality is the means and essence amidst

the dappled bioregion. Practising the paths to ecospirituality sincerely is the means of achieving successful and peaceful life in the bioregion. The bioregion is the shelter of our lives and abode of solace. Hence, we must safeguard the bioregion and live in bliss and safety forever.

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