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Echoes of the Forest: Spirituality and Nature in the Writings of Mamang Dai and Esther Syiem

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ABSTRACT :

This research paper examines the deep relationship between spirituality and nature in the works of Mamang Dai and Esther Syiem, two prominent Indigenous writers from Northeast India. By drawing from the ecological and cultural frameworks of the Adi and Khasi peoples, the study examines how they reimagine nature not as a landscape but as a spiritual and sentient form. The paper explores in detail the relationship between spirituality, nature and cultures in Dai's *The Legends of Pensam*, *The Black Hill and River Poems*; and Syiem's *Oral Scriptings*, *A Will to Argue*, and *Of Wit and Wisdom: Folk Tales from the North-East*, the study show that Indigenous literature is highly entrenched with ancestral memory, animistic cosmology and ecological reverence. The researcher utilizes theoretical and conceptual lenses involving ecospirituality, cultural ecology and Indigenous knowledge to argue that the forest, river, and sacred grove emerge as metaphysically potent manners in which these works affirm cultural identity and reject anthropocentric sensibilities. Because Dai's poetics draws on light and water; and Syiem invokes sacred groves and matrilineal myths, they each in their own way, call for stewardship through their Indigenous perspectives on the environment. Syiem's focus on oral histories and obligations, mythological symbolism, and eco-feminism affords important juxtaposition to the shamanic lyricism and mythopoeic representations of Dai. Their texts span orality and textuality, transforming literature into a vessel of ecological intelligence and spiritual succession. In an age of environment crisis and cultural homogenization, Dai and Syiem provide powerful examples of resilience, rootedness and reverence. This paper contends that their texts will contribute greatly to Indigenous and post-colonial literature and offer important considerations for re-imagining relationships with nature during this current ecological crisis.

Keywords : Indigenous Ecospirituality, Cultural Ecology, Animistic Cosmology, Riverine and Forest Imagery, Oral Traditions and Textuality

Introduction

At the heart of Northeast India includes an astonishing number of Indigenous groups, whose worldview is inextricably tied to the lifeways of their ecosystems. Among its most remarkable and compelling literary voices are Mamang Dai (Adi) from Arunachal Pradesh, and Esther Syiem (Khasi) from Meghalaya. Their works go beyond being artifacts of culture. Their literary attempts are spiritual testimonies that embrace articulations of an ontological relationship between humanity and nature. In an age defined by ecological catastrophe and cultural extinction, Dai and Syiem call upon the forest, river, wind and sacred grove not as texts, but as living entities alive with memory, voice and agency.

This paper employs ideas from ecospirituality, cultural ecology and Indigenous knowledge systems to examine Dai's *The Legends of Pensam*, *The Black Hill*, and *River Poems*, as well as Syiem's *Oral Scriptings*, *A Will to Argue*, and *Of Wit and Wisdom: Folk Tales from the North-East*. The argument is made that their texts resist individualist anthropocentrism and colonialism, utility and spectacle and instead they try to articulate a cosmology of connectedness where nature and spiritualism are seamlessly intertwined. Through the tools of myth, ritual and poetic imagination they create literary spaces for ecological ethics and Indigenous resiliency.

Indigenous Cosmologies and Ecological Ontologies

Within Indigenous epistemologies, nature is both animate and sacred; relational and a network of relationships. The forest is not a wilderness that needs to be conquered, but rather a sentient being that speaks to the fate of humankind. This notion is starkly evident in Mamang Dai's poetic assertion:

"The river has a soul. It remembers everything." (*The Black Hill*)

This quote captures the spiritual ecology characterizing and informing her writing. Rivers, mountains, birds and trees are not simply backdrops for photographs but sites where ancestral memories, natural, and cosmic equilibrium are held. In the Khasi cosmology, the Law Kyntang (sacred grove) is both spiritual and ecological—it is a spiritual and ecological pau-anana, a representation of the divine, where even a falling leaf is a thing of value.

Esther Syiem also denoted the same belief in her poem from *Oral Scriptings*:

"Here, in this green-lit hush,
the gods whisper through leaves."

Both authors place nature in the position of divine communication. They resist rationalist Enlightenment and capitalist utilitarianism as impossible. Their work invokes a holistic worldview in which sacredness is ecological and ecology is sacred.

Mamang Dai's Riverine Spiritualities and Ethics of Memory

Mamang Dai's imaginative world is situated in the topography, stories, and belief system of Arunachal Pradesh, where river serves as a powerful motif that infuses much of her writing. Dai's aesthetic writing emphasises the presence of the river and brings the idea of the spirituality of riverine-ness, a term that resonates with rivers, both as physical locations/structures and also as retentive and active agents of identity, culture, and cosmology.

In Dai's poetry collection *River Poems* (2004), the river is not just a physical space where the reader reflects. It is an agent of identity construction and cosmology, when she reflects on the river in lines, "I was born to the sound of the river / the whisper of reeds," identity unfolds from the natural spaces rather than a socially and constructed space. This suggests an animist account where rivers are active living entities, and not just powerful physical entities, but spiritual-infused consciousness. Rivers, according to Indigenous Adi belief structures, can be enshrined and classes of water can be put to consideration as ancestors/spirit ancestors and for rites of passage. Accordingly, Dai's gestures to begin with the river exemplifies advocacy for an animist perspective that recognizes nature as communicating creatures and acting/animated subjects.

Her lyrical and elliptical writing style which is rich in imagery exemplifies similar characteristics of an emerging water consciousness like flowing, cyclical, and reflecting. The poetic form reinforces the river's symbolic use as a location for memory (the recollection of the past), changes (to symbolize life's ephemerality), and transcendence (fulfilling a role as a connection for the mortal and spiritual worlds).

This symbolic geography is further developed in her novel *The Legends of Pensam* (2006). "Pensam," an Adi word, refers to an "in-between place," and emerges as the narrative's organizing metaphor of liminality not just in a sense of space or time but in a sense of cosmological borders. Through the lens of liminality, Dai presents Indigenous ideas of the sacred, wherein the material and the spiritual intermingle and flow into one another.

For instance, one legend tells of a shaman transforming into a bird, indicating some kind of spiritual transcendence that cannot be achieved by people. In another story, a woman becomes the spirit of a hill once she dies, showing how permeable the boundary can be between human life and the natural world. All these stories depict an animistic cosmology in an Indigenous worldview where humans, animals, plants, and land formations are all tied together through cycles of transformation and spiritual significance while also responding against non-Indigenous modern day dualisms like nature and culture or body and soul.

So, Dai's study counters the prominent anthropocentric and rationalist paradigms by presenting an alternative idea of ecological spirituality that draws on Indigenous knowledge systems that weave cultural narratives which constitute nature as sacred and humans as guardians, not masters, of the Earth. Dai's riverine poetics drawn from myth and memory, facilitates action against ecological destruction as well as an alternative spirituality to the modern disconnection of nature.

Syiem's Sacred Groves and the Poetics of Resistance

Esther Syiem, a Khasi poet and folklorist from Meghalaya, uses the spiritual ecology of her community to critique the commodification and degradation of sacred natural sites. At the heart of her poetic and narrative imagination is the sacred grove, Law Kyntang, a religious space and nature preserve critical to Khasi customs. Customary laws guide such groves, warded by taboos that prohibit any harvesting or destruction, which perpetuate the grove's biodiversity and contribute spiritual purity to Khasi culture.

In Syiem's poetry collection, *A Will to Argue* (2013), she sees these groves not merely as spiritual spaces, but contested ecological spaces that especially consider contemporary land enclosure, deforestation, and resource extraction. In her reflective poem *Sacred Grove*, Syiem includes the bold declaration,

"These trees are not yours to name /
they have the names of our dead."

Syiem's declaration reflects a deeply Indigenous ontology where naming is claiming, and where renaming is a colonial practice of epistemic violence and territoriality.

By refusing to engage in the act of naming, Syiem reclaims the forest as an ancestral archive. In her poetry, the trees do not belong to a consumerist present but to the collective memory of the Khasi. They make the grove not only a spiritual entity, but also a symbolic site of resistance to both ecological and cultural erasure.

Syiem's interest in the cultural continuation is evident in her publication *Of Wit and Wisdom: Folk Tales from the North-East* (2010) where she collects and retells Khasi's oral traditions. The stories in the Khasi tradition are structured as pools of ecological knowledge through generations often by women and elders. In these stories, the forest is both a moral realm and a spiritual tutor. The protagonists engage with nature and are tested by the way they treat it, whether they respect it or break the sacred order. The consequences they face are based on the moral value of the community.

Syiem's storytelling strengthens the idea that in Khasi epistemology, nature is not simply a passive matter rather, it is an active being that can receive moral judgement. Syiem's poetry expressed in English delivery of oral wisdom, is not a dislocation from tradition. It is simply a shift or a modification of movement that will ensure that Khasi eco-spiritual values are reinscribed in the global imagination rather than only contained in oral memory. This places her writing at the juncture of preservation and resistance, tradition and modernity.

All in all, Syiem's literary engagement with the sacred grove expresses a poetics of resistance that is very strongly positioned in Indigenous knowledge, feminist voice and ecological ethics. Her writing demands that genuine environmental stewardship cannot be divorced from the spiritual and cultural contexts of place, and that the forest must be re-membered not as a resource, but as kin.

Ecospirituality as Resistance: Challenging the Anthropocene

The authors use literature as an inflection of ecospiritual resistance. In a world described by Chakrabarty (2009) as a "climate of history in a planetary age," Dai and Syiem call for a new re-sacralization of nature as part of this alternative ecospiritual worldview. They do not offer techno-scientific solutions, but they both create a moral imagination that understands human beings as a place of belonging in secular ecological terms.

In Dai's River Poems, lament is more like a spiritual protest,

"The earth has turned away/ her face is veiled in dust."

Likewise, Syiem also states as,

"We traded the whispers of the woods/ for the noise of neon."

The power of these lines cannot be explained solely by their aesthetic, these lines are ethical challenges against environmental degradation that urge the readers to listen to the silences of the forest and confront what it means to belong to humanly, to land, to lineage, or to life.

Their work resonates with global Indigenous literary projects, and shares thematic relationships to the work of literature such as Linda Hogan from Chickasaw, Joy Harjo from Muscogee (Creek), Jeannette Armstrong from Syilx Okanagan, as well as numerous Indigenous activist movements around the world. What distinguishes the literature of Dai and Syiem is both the specificity of cultural geography i.e., Northeast India and its eco-cultural complexity and the commitment to preserving its spiritual grammar.

Conclusion- Literature as Sacred Ecology

In *Echoes of the Forest*, we witness a conception of literature that is sacred ecology. For Mamang Dai and Esther Syiem, writing is not just a creative act that is secular, it is a kind of ritual that they enact through which they listen to the land and embed themselves within it, just as they use their writings to speak the truths of the land. Their writings have drawn upon Indigenous cosmologies to create a powerful retelling, or counter-narrative to modernity's ecological amnesia. The rivers and groves, myths and chants, women and spirits, all wrap together to help inform an ethical ecology that is both literary and lived.

By developing a view of the forest as kin, not as other, Dai and Syiem bring enchantment, oversight and mutuality back into our understanding of nature. Their writing not only opens up discourses that are vital to postcolonial and Indigenous literature, but are vital to the pressing work that is to reinvent sustainable futures.

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