

Women, Land and Memory: An Indigenous Feminist Reading of Mamang Dai and Easterine Kire

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Abstract

The present paper explores the theme of women, land, cultural memory, spirituality and identity of Northeast Indian literature through the eyes of Indigenous feminists, especially the authors of Mamang Dai and Easterine Kire. Using Indigenous feminist theory as a lens, the research explores how both writers decentered the conventional representation of Indigenous communities, showing the land as a living cultural space that is tied to ancestors, community, spirituality and collective memory. The *The Black Hill*, *The Legends of Pensam*, and *River Poems* by Dai are explored as works that are representative of ecological belonging, the female voice, oral traditions, and the female body to Indigenous territory. Kire's *A Terrible Matriarchy*, *When the River Sleeps*, and *Sky Is My Father: A Naga Village Remembered* are examined to discuss the gendered expectations, Indigenous spirituality, oral history, colonial dispossession, and cultural resistance. The study shows that both writers present women as significant agents of knowledge and knowledge transmission and also give a glimpse of conflict in the traditional social system. While Kire explores the re-awakening of Naga historical consciousness and gendered power dynamics, Dai's writing is more concerned with the ecological and poetic relationship with landscape and memory. The comparative analysis shows that Indigenous women's sense of self is constructed through the connection with land, community, ancestral knowledge, and memory. Thus, in their literature, they represent a cultural form of preservation and resistance to the erasure of patriarchy and colonialism.

Keywords: Indigenous Feminism, Mamang Dai, Easterine Kire, Women, Land, Cultural Memory, Indigenous Identity

Introduction

Indigenous women's writing from the Northeast of India offers a valuable literary forum for the explorations of the intertwining issues of gender, land, cultural identity, memory, and resistance (Tripathi and Beck 01–14). An Indigenous feminist method is especially helpful because it transcends notions of universal oppression against women and reflects the diverse histories, traditional practices, colonial experiences, ecological connections and organisational forms of Indigenous communities (Guerrero 58–69). In this context, the works of Mamang Dai and Easterine Kire are important examples of the cultural struggle of indigenous women between tradition, modernity, cultural continuity and the shifting social relations. Their works focus the experience of land and community, the importance of storytelling and memory are significant in the work, and

histories that have historically been at the edges of national narratives are brought to the fore.

In Dai's eyes, the nature environment is deeply linked with cultural awareness. Rivers, mountains, forests, and ancestral spaces are not only physical settings, they are a repository for collective memory and indigenous knowledge. Her poetry therefore raises the question of the divide between human experience and nature. Historical encounters and cultural conflict further explore the interconnectedness of land and questions of belonging and identity in *The Black Hill*. (Nishtha and Tiwari 37–41), (Ghosh 23–31)

Kire's fiction also is personal, collective, and cultural. *A Terrible Matriarchy* offers a particularly important gender lens, in that it illustrates the intricate workings of patriarchy through the female as well as male power. Research on the novel reveals that gender equality is not

guaranteed if women are in charge, and that traditional structures can be reproduced by women (**Mor and Yadav 19–22**). In the meantime, When the River Sleeps and Sky Is My Father puts the emphasis on the oral history, spirituality, landscape, and historical consciousness of indigenous people. Recent scholarship reveals that the practice of oral tradition and memory is a strategy for Kire to reclaim the histories of the Naga people that have been marginalized and to challenge colonial histories. Another colonialism, land dispossession, cultural dispossession theme that is highlighted in the research on Sky Is My Father is the link between the three. (**Mandal and Singh 203–09**)

Indigenous Feminism: Theoretical Framework

Indigenous Feminism is an analysis of Indigenous women's experiences in relation to the interrelated impacts of colonialism, patriarchy, racism, dispossession, cultural erasure and ecological exploitation. It focuses on sovereignty, self-determination, land, cultural identity and collective memory. Land is known as more than just property, but as a connection between people, ancestors, animals, spirituality and community. Indigenous knowledge and the contestation of colonial histories are passed on through oral traditions, storytelling, and women's memories. It is useful for analysing Mamang Dai and Easterine Kire who write on women's struggles, cultural preservation, spirituality, landscape, ecological relationships, oral histories, and resistance to patriarchy and colonial erasure.

Women, Land and Indigenous Identity in Mamang Dai

Mamang Dai's writings are not just about land, they are about a territory alive with stories of indigenous identity, memory, spirituality and community life. Her portrayals of women are intimately tied to this "land way" of thinking. In The Black Hill, The Legends of Pensam, and River Poems, Dai collects the stories of women, oral history, ecological interactions, and the cultural memory of the Adi and other indigenous lands of Arunachal Pradesh.

The Black Hill

Land in The Black Hill is a source of indigenous knowledge and identity. From an Indigenous feminist standpoint, this challenges the authority of the Christian missionary with its assertion that

"The land is our book. Everything here on the hill, the grass and rocks and stones is saying something." (**Dai 140**)

particularly significant because they are creating an indigenous perspective on the landscape, one that is outside of colonial institutions. Adopting a similarly experiential and intimate approach to the land, the novel also introduces the concept of a relationship with the land that is not about possession but about living with it, being born of it, and remembering it: (**Ananyaa and Nayak 73–84**)

"When you are closely linked to the land, it speaks to you in little whispers and nudges." (**Dai 113**)

Women, especially Gimur, are placed in this environment as agents of a changing indigenous world. (**Verma and Johri 16-25**)

The Legends of Pensam

Dai builds up indigenous identity in The Legends of Pensam by weaving together stories, myths, memories and oral traditions. The title itself is important:

"the word 'pensam' means 'in-between'", (**Dai 7**)

Implying a place in between the past remembered and the lived reality. The book says that

"Anything can happen and everything can be lived" (**Dai 7**)

At Pensam (The Legends of Pensam) and redefines geography as a cultural and imaginative space.

Women are significant bearers of this cultural heritage. The book also contains chapters on

"Pinyar the Widow, (Dai 26) " "The Words of Women," (Dai 73) "River Woman," (Dai 80) and "Daughters of the Village," (Dai 89)

That highlight the vital role of women's voices in the reconstruction of community history. The Legends of Pensam" are stories that give women their story back into the collective indigenous archive.

River Poems

The river is one of the most evocative symbols of indigenous memory and belonging in River Poems. She writes *"the river has a soul"* in "Small Towns and the River", (**Dai 29**) and the river is linked to grief, to

childhood, to death, to spirituality, and to the continuity of life. Its journey from “*the first drop of rain to dry earth*” is an ecological cycle that parallels the continuity of cultural memory. (Dai 29)

Gender, Land and Cultural Memory in Easterine Kire

Fiction by Easterine Kire offers a large sample of the Naga woman, indigenous land, oral tradition and cultural memory. Her stories show that it is not possible to study gender without involving other social, ecological, historical and cultural settings of Naga society. In *A Terrible Matriarchy*, *When the River Sleeps*, and *Sky Is My Father: A Naga Village Remembered*, Kire delves into the lives of women who are making a way for themselves in their traditional expectations, and of indigenous peoples who continue to fight to keep their land and their cultural heritage alive. Her fiction has also been discussed in *Kire*, a journal on scholarship, and is also regarded as a vital means of reclaiming Naga history, identity, oral tradition and marginalization.

A Terrible Matriarchy

Gender is examined from a complex perspective in *A Terrible Matriarchy*, as Kire does not offer a one-dimensional picture of oppression as being born out exclusively by males. Dielieno is raised by her grandmother, Vibano, who sees the importance of a girl to learn how to do domestic chores and behave according to the conventional standards. Thus the novel illustrates the transmission and enforcement of the values of the patriarchy by women themselves. In recent feminist scholarship it is specifically argued that the novel blurs the lines between the two notions of patriarchy and matriarchy, as female power can carry on oppressive gender norms. (Mor and Yadav 19–22), (Konwar 46–50)

Through Dielieno's experiences, readers will see the disparity in the worth of boys and girls, and the way traditional gender roles limit women's autonomy. Her grandmother's insistence that she become a “good Naga woman” is an example of the pressure women are subjected to that they conform to social norms. It is also significant that the novel is focused on education: Dielieno's love of education serves as a way to challenge the restrictions placed on her. In turn, then, female

education is linked to agency, self-expression and resistance.

When the River Sleeps

As Naga spirituality and cultural consciousness are inextricably linked with land in *When the River Sleeps*, the land cannot be separated from it. Vilie embarks on a challenging quest to find a sacred stone in a forest, where he meets with humans, animals and spirits. Kire builds nature as an active force and not as a setting. The phrase “*Sky is my father, Earth is my mother*” (Kire 103)

is a native understanding of the community's kinship with nature. (Bhattacharyya 19)

The river, forest and animals, spirits and mountains are all part of a cultural landscape, where indigenous knowledge is maintained.

Sky Is My Father

In *Sky Is My Father: A Naga Village Remembered* Kire rescripts the history of the memory of Khonoma and Naga resistance to British colonialism. The narrative is oriented around the concept of land as a fundamental element of community identity, survival and resistance. Colonial expansion engendered dispossession of land, and colonial history engendered dispossession of culture: recovery of indigenous history is thus of paramount importance, as scholarship has shown.

(Mandal and Singh 203–09)

Storytelling is a practice of memory and cultural persistence in the opening statement

“*We will speak of those times. The words are still in our breath. The fire is not cold,*” (Kire 1)

The scenery of the village is again conveyed in a sensory way in that the smoke rising from the houses and also the hills surrounding Khonoma make the village a lived and remembered homeland.

Thus, in Kire's three works, gender, land and memory are interwoven aspects of the indigenous identity. Women hold on to and mediate cultural values; land is a place of homeland and history. Oral remembrance, spirituality and literary memory, Kire defies the oblivion of the history of Naga people, making room for an indigenous voice to tell their own story.

Women as Custodians of Cultural Memory

The role of women in maintaining memory, in transmitting and interpreting memory is an important one in the selected works of Mamang Dai and Easterine

Kire. These writers do not view memory merely as a personal memory of the past but also as a connection to storytelling, family practices, customary knowledge, oral traditions and daily experiences. Indigenous memory is passed on through the female characters and stories of women.

Women play a special role in maintaining the memory of the community in *The Legends of Pensam*. Within the collection itself, the organizational framework highlights the importance of women's voices in the collection, including sections like "The Words of Women," "River Woman," and "Daughters of the Village." Why these titles are important is because they involve women in the story-telling and memory of the community itself, rather than viewing them as a mere part of the community's history.

The story of "Pinyar, the Widow" is particularly valuable to grasp how the suffering of the individual woman is translated into collective memory. Pinyar tells of the social requirements and moral standards placed on women. In Dai's words,

"To be happy, a woman has to be born lucky." (Dai 82)

This reveals how little agency women have and also notifies the lived experiences of women in the community's narrative.

Dai's personal knowledge of her female characters also gives insight.

"Women of the tribe who protect family and clan" (Dai 5)

And adds that they can also

"Break tradition and are ready to pay the price., She says." (Dai 5)

Easterine Kire, a terrible matriarchy.

Cultural memory is passed down in *A Terrible Matriarchy*, mainly through the older generation of people—specifically Dielieno's grandmother, Vibano. As for intergenerational transmission, the grandmother tries to teach Dielieno domestic knowledge and gender expectations, which are part of the transmission. The book is also a clear articulation of the idea that Dielieno would be made a good Naga wife and mother.

But Kire is not a romanticist with this transmission. The same cultural processes that maintain tradition can also perpetuate gender disparity. Dielieno slowly doubts what she has come to believe and asserts herself as a person.

Kire — Sky Is My Father: A Naga Village Remembered

Women in *Sky Is My Father: A Naga Village Remembered* engage with the daily maintenance of village culture in the context of domestic life, family relations, rituals and community. Re-constructing the past is as much a form of cultural preservation as is the story itself. Analysis of the text shows that storytelling and oral tradition are one way for Kire to regain the memory of the past and the ways of knowing indigenous peoples.

In fact, simply bringing back women with "*baskets with firewood*" is a small, but significant representation of the role of ordinary woman work in the remembered cultural landscape. This will prevent the indigenous history from becoming just a series of wars and political events but will maintain its daily life.

The land, body and indigenous identity.

Land and the female body are inextricably linked to indigenous identity and survival in *The Black Hill*. Gimur's experiences highlight the impact of colonized space and gender oppression on native lands and on women. Garden is not just a place but a place of memory, spirituality, belonging. The forested setting of the novel is in recent scholarship termed an archive of indigenous presence, embodied, in Gimur's case. Dai's representation thus relates the female body to place: the displacement of land also generates cultural and emotional displacement. Indigenous identity is developed in relation to forests, rivers, community and ancestral knowledge, not through external definitions. (Verma and Johri 16-25), (Ghosh 23-31)

In *When the River Sleeps*, Vilie's walk through the forest is a physical adventure that brings together physical strength and a sacred knowledge of the geography of the forest. The river and the surrounding landscape are not merely scenery but are active participants in his quest for spirituality (Bhattacharyya 19). This is one area where Scholarship is an identifier of Kire's focus on landscape in the construction of Angami cultural and indigenous identity (L. and B 674-680). Oral history, myth and relationships with the natural world constitute the novel's cultural memory. Therefore, the land is a part of one's identity and the body is a vehicle for experiencing ancestral knowledge, spirituality, vulnerability, and belonging (Dutta et al. 440–50).

Comparative Analysis: Mamang Dai and Easterine Kire

Both Mamang Dai and Easterine Kire come from distinct Indigenous communities in the Northeast Indian states, and have a shared literary engagement with the interrelationships between women, land, cultural memory, spirituality and Indigenous identity. Their writing is confrontational to the dichotomy of gender/ecology/history/culture. Land for both writers is more than a geographical area and economic resource—it is a repository of ancestral knowledge, collective memory, belonging, and identity.

The Black Hill, The Legends of Pensam, and River Poems are some of Dai's works that focus on the connection between women and the landscapes of Arunachal Pradesh. As she portrays rivers, forests, mountains and ancestral places, nature emerges as an active part of Indigenous life. The Legends of Pensam brings women into focus as important holders of community memory and oral history, including the Daughters of the Village and the River Woman Pinyar. Dai thus brings women's stories back into the Indigenous archive. In the novel The Black Hill she treats of Gimur, who is an embodiment of the female body, so as to further link the female body with land, displacement, memory, and cultural belonging.

Like Kire, Kireet is also exploring the connection between gender, land and cultural memory, but her works sometimes offer a more direct investigation into the social structures and gendered expectations. A Terrible Matriarchy is a book about Dielieno's experiences, in which she finds that patriarchy can be passed down and reinforced by women. What her grandmother expects of her in terms of marriage and being a "good Naga woman" illustrates how tradition can both be passed on and limit women's agency. Dielieno's educational aspirations turn into a form of resistance and self-expression.

Both writers are also narrators and recollectors of culture. While Dai focuses on the voices of women, oral tradition, myths, and ecological memory, Kire focuses on the recovery of Naga history, spirituality, and memories excluded from colonial history. Not only does Sky Is My Father bring back Khonoma's past, but it also depicts storytelling as an active, cultural persistence in Khonomas' culture, and the landscape is an active spiritual and cultural force in When the River Sleeps.

So, Dai's is very poetic, ecological and memory-based, while Kire's, is memory-based and has a more incisive critique on gendered social structures. However, both provide evidence that Indigenous identity is inextricable from land, community, traditional knowledge, and culture. Through their works, they make literature a place of reclaiming Indigenous voices, fighting the erasure, and affirming cultural continuity.

Conclusion

A comparative reading of Mamang Dai and Easterine Kire reveals the importance of an Indigenous feminist perspective in reading the connections between gender, land, memory, spirituality and cultural identity in Northeast Indian literature. Both writers raise doubts about the notion that Indigenous women's experiences are gendered. Dai's paintings focus on cultural thriftiness, women's narratives, heritage, and the intersections of landscape and the female body, while Kire's paintings highlight the gendered social norms, cultural practices, Indigenous traditions, and reclamation of Naga history. They have women characters who are both traditioned and can question or resist the restrictive aspects of tradition. Land is presented as a living cultural archive, not simply a backdrop. Oral histories, memory, storytelling, and portrayals of women's lives challenge cultural and colonial erasure, as do the depictions of women on film and TV. As do the depictions of women on film and television, as well as oral history, memory, and storytelling, Dai and Kire defy cultural and colonial erasure. Through their writings, they conclude that Indigenous women are active custodians, interpreters, and reshapers of cultural memory and identity.

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