

Metaphors of Land and Indigeneity: Ways of Identification in Mamang Dai's 'River Poems' and 'Green in the Time of Flood'

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Mamang Dai — Image by Mukul Pathak

Northeast Anglophone literature is marked by the ubiquity of spatial imagination, however, place as a critical paradigm of understanding the heterogeneous indigenous cultural fabric of the region has been esoterically reduced to the political discourse concerning sub-nationalisms, secessionist movements, and insurgency. Northeast, a corollary of the cartographic imagination engendered by the nation-state, is a geopolitical straitjacket of putting the indigenous diversity and unique ways of life within a unitary and totalizing set of temporal and spatial experiences. Viewing the northeast as a war-zone, a troubled territory is the result of such reductive geopolitical perception. However, the sense of place emanating from the writings of the region while articulating ways of identifying with the physical environment of a region from which grows a unique human culture of sustainable dwelling subverts the paradigm of the nation-state as the only legitimized lens of making sense of a geographical location. The alternative spatial imagination immanent in contemporary Northeast literature resurfaces possibilities of altogether different understanding of issues related to indigeneity and place-based identity of the different tribes of the region. Situations of recurrent violence and political crisis lead to the territorialization of the Northeast within the framework of the clichéd dichotomizations of 'centre' against 'margin' and 'mainland India' against 'Northeast'. These stratified binaries map the heterogeneous ethnic communities of the Northeast as mere 'political communities' striving for their 'rights' from the margins of a nation-state. Therefore, it is not erroneous to say that articulation of 'indigeneity' is the reflection of 'marginality'. However, it is quite problematic to assert that to what extent it is tenable to consider 'marginality' as a reflection of

the condition of being indigenous to a place. Or to put it differently is indigeneity merely associated with a community's political rights and autonomy of self-governance in a given place. In extension can we only deduce that indigeneity conceives a group of people as a unique 'political community' having complete control over a geographical terrain? Indigeneity delineates a condition of the unique sense of belonging to a region or a geographical location that is not merely determined by the political markers of a nation-state. Being indigenous may also stand for a bioregional way of life i.e. an awareness of the ecological order operating within and around a region from which grows a unique human culture of sustainable dwelling. It is a way of becoming native to a place by means of locating oneself in a reciprocal and mutually nourishing relationship among human and non-human, biotic and abiotic entities of the environment of a particular region. Indigeneity in a bioregional sense fosters cultural practices, faith, customs, and rituals that ensure the sustainability of the ecological life-supporting capacity of a region. Mamang Dai in her poems "Green in the Time of Flood" and "River Poems" sets forth an altogether different vantage point of perceiving indigenous people's spatial identification with the physical environment of their region, which fosters a way of life inseparably connected to entities of the environment. Dai's spatial imagination maps the bioregional dimension of indigeneity and the sense of belonging of the natives of Arunachal to their region, an aspect that has never been articulated within the discursive framework of the nation-state. This paper is an attempt to chart the above-mentioned points and positions in the select poems of Mamang Dai.

Bioregionalism is an ecophilosophical position that proposes the idea of 'natural community', a community of people whose ways of life, faith, ritual and life embellishing activities are restricted within the natural limits of the region of their dwelling. Bioregionalism finds the models of sustainable dwelling within the region-scale ecological order in the indigenous way of life of different aboriginal communities across the globe. Robert L. Thayer Jr. in his book *Life Place: Bioregional Thought and Practice* (2003) defines a bioregion as a life-place having a life-accommodating ecosystem which is self-sustaining and self-nourishing:

A bioregion is literally and etymologically a "life-place"¹—a unique region definable by natural (rather than political) boundaries with a geographic, climatic, hydrological, and ecological character capable of supporting unique human and nonhuman living communities. Bioregions can be variously defined by the geography of watersheds, similar plant and animal ecosystems, and related, identifiable landforms (e.g., particular mountain ranges, prairies, or coastal zones) and by the unique human cultures that grow from natural limits and potentials of the region. Most importantly, the bioregion is emerging as the most logical locus and scale for a sustainable, regenerative community to take root and to *take place*. (Thayer 3)

Being bioregional involves a way of sustainable dwelling with the ecological consciousness that human activities should be restricted from causing damaging effects on the life-supporting system of ecology of a place. Gary Snyder in his book *The Practice of the Wild* (1990) emphasizes the relevance of region-scale community formation and within this framework a place becomes home for a human community with naturally defined boundaries and ways of dwelling. In this spatial arrangement, according to Snyder, human culture is the manifestation of the spirit of a place:

... older human experience of a fluid, indistinct, but genuine home region was gradually replaced — across Eurasia — by the arbitrary and often violently imposed boundaries of emerging national states. These imposed borders sometimes cut across biotic areas and ethnic zones alike. Inhabitants lost

ecological knowledge and community solidarity. In the old ways, the flora and fauna and landforms are part of the culture. (Snyder 40)

From Snyder's proposition it becomes evident that bioregionalism envisions human community in relation to the ecology and forms of life of the region of dwelling. Having grown from a close relation with the environment, bioregional culture issues forth human activities manifesting local knowledge and ecological sustenance. He conceptualizes bioregionalism as awareness of the spirit of a place, an ecological consciousness that corroborates metonymic interrelationships among all ecological components for shaping a bioregion as a living organism: "to know the spirit of a place is to realise that you are part of a part and that the whole is made of parts, each of which is whole. You start with the part you are whole in" (Snyder 41).

Mamang Dai's poems "River Poems" and "Green in the Time of Flood" resurface the bioregional dimensions of Adi community's indigeneity and way of life inhabiting in the unique bioregion of Arunachal. "River Poems" limns how the native way of life is shaped by the ecological order operating within and around the region. The long term sustainable dwelling in the region has engendered a body of local knowledge of decoding the messages immanent in the physical environment. The inner projection of the ecological order of the region marks the growth of a human culture of mutually nourishing relationship between the human and the environment:

Without speech
we practised a craft
leaving imprints on sky walls,
linking the seasons,
coding the trailing mist
in silent messages across the vast landscape. (Dai 66)

'Without speech' refers to a unique oral legacy of cultural tradition based on the reciprocity between the natives and the physical environment. At the same time, it is also indicative of the internalization of the ecological order of the region which moulds the patterns of living in oneness with nature – a way of life that has been handed down across generations through an oral mnemonic legacy. The natives 'practice a craft' of 'linking the seasons' – this is indicative of the culture of dwelling in a place according to the seasonal mobility of the region, a quintessential marker of the aboriginal/indigenous way of identifying with a place. The Indigenous way of living in a place is marked by an awareness of the seasonal characteristics of the region depending on which human activities and practices are moulded. A unique bioregion's capacity to support life depends on the seasonal abundance, and the bioregional way of life is all about restricting the patterns of living within the natural limits of the seasonal character of a region. The 'silent messages' coded in the 'trailing mist' echoing in 'across the vast landscape' evokes the inner projection of seasonal patterns palpably visible in native cultural manifestations. William Cronon in his book *Changes in the Land: Indians, Colonists, and the Ecology of New England* (1983) demonstrates that the relationship of New England Indians to their environment is determined by the cycle of seasons, and it is a relationship based on ecological ethics as the natives hold less demand on the ecosystem of the place by changing their habitat within the region as per natural abundance of seasons. To Cronon, whereas the ecological relationship of the natives with their place is characterised by mobility, however, the European colonisers seek to establish a relationship based on fixities. This is evident as the European settlers strive to reproduce ecological relationship of European standard in the aboriginal places by means of establishing monoculture of agricultural policies and commodification of natural components. European fixity is further evident in their intent of attaining complete control over the

environment of the place by compartmentalizing landscape for permanent human settlement, bureaucratic establishment, agricultural fields, domesticated animals, recreational parks, reserve forest and so on. The segmentation of natural landscape corroborates the tacit imperial policy of regimenting and exploiting the environment of the Non-European regions. Having attained the ecological knowledge of dwelling in their place of origin, the mobility of the natives as requisites of wheels of the season exhibits their shared responsibility for life-sustaining system of the region, on the other hand the fixity of the European settlers manifests a human intervention to reorganise the landscape and ecological properties of the region with a motif of accumulation of capital and commercial enterprise:

But whereas Indian villages moved from habitat to habitat to find maximum abundance through minimal work, and so reduce their impact on the land, the English believed in and required permanent settlements. Once a village was established, its improvements—cleared fields, pastures, buildings, fences, and so on — were regarded as more or less fixed features of the landscape. English fixity sought to replace Indian mobility; here was the central conflict in the ways Indians and colonists interacted with their environments. (Cronon 57)

The “central conflict” between the natives and European colonisers, according to Cronon, can be comprehended by the strife to “replace Indian mobility” with “English fixity”. The mobility in dwelling the region on the part of the Indians involves their local knowledge of “habits and ecology of other species” (Cronon 37) on the one hand, and on the other hand it exhibits the process of learning to live-in-a-place without affecting the life-supporting system of the environment as the “Indians seek to obtain their food wherever it was seasonally most concentrated in the New England ecosystem” (Cronon 37). Indian mobility is based on seasonal diversity and it shapes a way of living life in a place holding less demand on the ecology. Whereas spring marks the abundance of seasonally produced food items of different kinds, winter on the other hand ushers the season of scarcity. Cronon observes, while the Indians feel it wise to remain starved for days during winter with an assurance that spring will again bring abundance, but for the European settlers it is rather beyond any rational comprehension as to why the Indians prefer to remain starved when there is enormous possibility of extracting the environment for human comfort. Mamang Dai’s poem foregrounds the ecologically determined culture of the natives of Arunachal that Cronon identifies in the Native American way of life. It is a biocentric cultural paradigm in its material and spiritual manifestations that collapses the boundaries between nature and culture.

In “Green in the Time of Flood” Dai uses hope as a metaphor for living mindfully according to the seasonal cycle of the region. The natives’ participation in the physical environment facilitates the growth of practices and activities permissible within the ecological order, and at the same time, the inner projection of the ecological order transforms the tangible environment into a spiritual entity of reverence. The poem traces the seasonal shift from the rainy season to the spring season, a shift from hardship to abundance. However, the hardship is accompanied by the hope that nature will mitigate the hardship with the abundance of the spring. The tedious rainy season fraught with scarcity submerges the valley, but it does not motivate the natives to mould and extract the environment to serve the human need. The cyclical process of nature’s rejuvenation is reflected through the metaphor of hope in the poem. It is the hope ingrained in the ecological order that is manifested in the seasonal mobility of the native way of life:

It was the green land that seduced us.

The scent of rain
and the river that found us, quite suddenly
one summer, restored to one another.
Time is a miracle when a season gives everything.
The river swallows whole islands,

.....

Time is a miracle where the colour green is wrapped
in the stillness of waiting
like the birth of days (Dai 86)

By moulding the way of life in tune with the seasonal mobility the indigenous people put in circulation a human culture that is inseparably embedded with the ecological order of the region. The adherence to the seasonal cycle is identical to the Native American's seasonal mobility, and that is why the poet observes: "It is the Green land that seduces us" (Dai 86). In both the poems Mamang Dai put forward how the indigenous people of Arunachal become native to their place by immersing in the physical environment of their region. Indigeneity in this sense is embedded in a culture that grows from the mutually nourishing relationship between the human and the environment. This belongingness to the land cannot be articulated by the markers of political discourse; rather it refers to a sense of place where the human culture and identity are located in a bioregional taproot. The environmental base of the natives' identification with the place is reflected in this way:

I stake my claim to peppermint and green fruit,
the life of growing things,
and a slice of moon across the world
where the banks slip away
and a new boundary marks our nights and our days.

Mamang Dai, in her poems, by foregrounding an alternative way of perceiving place, indigeneity, and identity, on the one hand, points to the limitations and reductive conclusions engendered by the spatial framework of the nation-state, and on the other hand, she also paves the way to transcend the prejudices and clichéd approaches in understanding indigenous spatial imagination.

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