



EXPLORING HISTORICAL NARRATIVES IN MAMANG DAI'S *Escaping the Land*: A CRITICAL ANALYSIS

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"if history forgets, fiction can remind us of many things"

- Amitav Ghosh

Abstract

Arunachal Pradesh's history is an amalgamation of myths, inter-tribe, inter-village, inter-clan and intra-tribal wars, slavery, colonial intrusion, and administrative policies. It is a complicated saga of social and cultural transition. Arunachal Pradesh is a preliterate society; hence, the state's past can be traced through the oral memory and accounts of travellers and visitors of the colonial era and *Buranjis*. The *Buranjis* and colonial accounts recorded historical landmark events in a non-linear narrative way. Oral memory in the form of myths and legends represents the collective belief that answers the questions of Why, What and How of tribal lives. But with the death of the previous generation, oral memories began to be lost. Engaging in fact and fiction Dai re-imagines the past of Arunachal Pradesh in her fiction. She humanizes history by intricately unravelling the stories of those unhistorical men and women who witnessed the effects of historical events in their lives. By delving into the history she adds to our understanding of the enigmatic past and chaotic present of Arunachal Pradesh. Therefore, in the present paper, the researcher has attempted to study Mamang Dai's *Escaping the Land* in light of a historical perspective.

Keywords: Oral Memory, Cultural History, Social History, Political History, Arunachal Pradesh

Introduction

History is a memory of past events. Literature enriches history by interpreting the lives and emotions involved in history in the form of stories. Therefore, it creates continuity between the past and the present. This continuity explains the past and enriches our vision to understand the present. New Historicist sees literature as

contributing to informing and participating in the construction of history. Mamang Dai is a writer who writes with historical awareness. Her works of fiction convey the reader to the historical interior of Arunachal Pradesh. She humanizes history by intricately unravelling the stories of those unhistorical men and women who witnessed the effects of historical events in their lives. By delving into the history she adds to our understanding of the enigmatic past and chaotic present of Arunachal Pradesh.

Escaping the Land in the Light of Historical Perspective

The journey from NEFA to Arunachal Pradesh is filled with the events of colonial conquest, cultural invasion and interference with political and administrative policies which led to a huge social paradigm shift in the state. These events and shifts have built the history of Arunachal Pradesh. Dai's latest novel *Escaping the Land* divided into four books narrates the historical journey of the transition of the state from NEFA to Arunachal Pradesh.

Arunachal Pradesh was unexplored land till the recent past. Because of its hilly geographical pattern, there was no real connection between the hills and the plain. There was no communication even between inter-tribes. They had little or no knowledge at all about the existence of others in the land. The cynical tribals perceived each other as strangers and as fearsome. They perceived the outsiders as hostile entities that had come to snatch their land and make them their slaves. This deep insecurity and the lack of desire on their part to accept the administrative subjugation caused misunderstanding and led to a bloody feud between the tribals and outsiders. The consequence of the feuds incited the expansion of administrative control into the land. The murder of British political officer Noel Williamson by Adis in Komsing in 1911 and its consequence is one of the important landmarks in the history of Arunachal Pradesh. It opens the door to the exploration of colonial power in Arunachal Pradesh. Another such major event during post post-independent era was the incident of Aching Mori in 1953 where forty-seven members of Indian government officials were killed by the Tagin tribe. These incidents created an image of Arunachal Pradesh as an ungovernable, savage and primitive land. As a consequence, it drew the serious attention of the central government to restructure the administrative policies in Arunachal Pradesh. The administrative control came under the supervision of the Ministry of External Affairs through the governor of Assam as his agent. The land was renamed from North East Frontier Tract (NEFT) to North East Frontier Agency (NEFA) in the year 1954. With this shift, the dawn of transition began in Arunachal Pradesh. Besides *Escaping the Land*, is compact with the important landmark occurrences of the past such as the Chinese aggression of 1962, and the liberation of Bangladesh in 1972 which were crucial dots in transforming the administrative policies in Arunachal Pradesh. Dai weaves her novel with the fabric of these historical incidents and narrates the tale of the transition of Arunachal Pradesh.

While individual and private experiences are sometimes overlooked in historical accounts Dai in introspective mode gives space to the prime characters in her novels to project the actual experiences, worries, and difficulties of ordinary people. It reveals the impact of historical events in the lives of everyday people and encourages the reader to speculate to know 'what happened' in the past. Lipun one of the major characters in the novel describes the struggles faced by a government official serving in the Indian Frontier Administrative

Service during the NEFA era.. It took months of foot march through the vast jungles to reach the posted place. The lurking fear of being attacked by wild animals and agitated tribals made the way more difficult. These officials despite the unprecedented challenges served in the remote outpost to maintain the government's stronghold in the region. Through the character of Lipun, Dai shows that the patriotic devotion of those trailblazer officials for their land and people built the foundation for today's Arunachal.

Dai emphatically presents the perception of tribals that led to this bloody incident of Aching Mori before the readers through the character Lipun.

“ ‘Jai Hind!’ they greeted him. The chief of the village was a grand old man who called his people around him to talk to Lipun. They laid their stick: ‘Look! This was the dark cloud! The soldiers were the dark cloud! They were coming to make us into slaves!’

‘No!’ Lipun argued. ‘Look at you. What is wrong with that woman there? Why is your son ill all the time? Why are your eyes going blind? It is not ghosts. It is not spirits. It is a disease! These things happen everywhere. People are cured by doctors who give them medicines. If you let the government come here your people will be healthier and happier. I promise you no one will steal your land. No one will turn you into slaves. If the Chinese come again the government will protect you...’ (Escaping the Land, 44-45)

Arunachal Pradesh is a preliterate society; hence, the state's cultural history is historically unmapped and unrepresented. Jan Vansina in his book *Oral Tradition a Study in Historical Methodology* states that, “the world inhabited by people without writing, oral tradition forms the main available source for a reconstruction of the past...” (I). Therefore, only through oral memories the unrecorded history of obscure past can be discovered. The collective memories are expressed in folklore as a ‘story of origin’ that constitutes the cultural history of Arunachal Pradesh. Dai retrieves the cultural history of the Adi community in the novel by employing her critically acclaimed skill of imagination. Adis believes *Kojum-Koja* is their source of origin.

“ 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 the world carrying stories of happiness and hope...” (Escaping the Land, 90)

Dai tells the story of *Kiine Naane* (the mother earth) and *Nyanyi Mete*, the celestial Aunt of humans. Adis believes *Kiine Naane* to be the source of all kinds of seeds and grains on the earth.

The Adis have strong faith in shamanism. They believe that shamans can heal the sick, communicate with the spirit world, and bring back dead souls. Dai presents this cultural belief through the character of the Rainman, a shaman who uses his magical power to bring rain, turn into a tiger, and make a dry stone weep.

Beads are an important part of tribal culture. For Adis *tadok* precious beads are a symbol of wealth and status. The acquisition of *tadok* (beads) by man has a story. The Adis believe that beads were given to men long ago by their spirit wives or lovers. Therefore, to honour the supernatural entity for their favour upon them, man sacrifice beasts such as mithun, cattle, pig and fowl as an offering. The story of a man from the Daji clan of

Sirkung who was given a tadok by his spirit lover allows us to understand the history of the acquisition of beads in Adi folk belief.

In the past, intertribal war, inter-village war, inter-clan war and slavery system were widespread. Wars and feuds were fought to establish the power and strength of a particular tribe or clan over others. In such strife, the victors take the men and women of the defeated tribes or clans as slaves to work for them. Dai evokes the past with imagination and describes the lived experiences of the passive victims of the slavery system.

“they were kept apart but they were given food and shelter and ordered to clear fields and fallen trees and chop wood for building and fencing arable land. They worked hard, and in time the younger, able-bodied men were sent to look after mithuns, gather thatch for roofing, and bring back fodder for the pigs... Years passed. The captive men died. Their wives succumbed to disease and despair and the new generation of men adopted the clan title of their owner... They had no memory of the places they had been taken from... The thought of running away never crossed their minds. Where would they run to, and for what? Life was food and breath and that was all there was...” (Escaping the Land, 96-97)

However, the practice of the slavery system has now ceased in Arunachal Pradesh. Dai unveils a particular period to attack the evil practices of the slave system while doing so she outlines the social history of Arunachal Pradesh in the novel.

The major part of the novel is devoted to the political history of Arunachal Pradesh. Through the fictional characters of political leaders such as Lutor, Tanik, Aohun and Rasa, the novel paints a vivid picture of the current political turmoil resulting from the apathy and insensitivity of previous political regimes. Dai offers deep insight into the burning issues of insurgents and refugees in the state.

Conclusion

Dai by putting imaginary people in real situations enlivens the cataloged and uncataloged history of Arunachal Pradesh. Interweaving fact and fiction she enlivened the history of Arunachal Pradesh in *Escaping the Land*. Arunachal's past, particularly its colonial and postcolonial history is intricately interwoven with the history of the nation though this has been neglected in political discourse for a long time. Dai has painstakingly uncovered historical memories through oral narratives and historical dates through archival records to document the landmark events that have shaped present-day Arunachal Pradesh. The fictional overtone of the novel does not detract from the historical sense of the narrative. *Escaping the Land* is one such momentous effort in the oeuvre of Mamang Dai.

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