



**VOICES:
A NATIONAL RESEARCH ANTHOLOGY
ON NORTHEAST INDIAN ENGLISH
POETRY**

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VOICES

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NORTHEAST INDIAN ENGLISH POETRY

Edited by

Dr Subhashis Banerjee

Dr Tuhin Majumdar

(Under the aegis of Jawaharlal Nehru College, Arunachal Pradesh and Khatra Adibasi Mahavidyalaya, Bankura, West Bengal)

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CHAPTER-8

MYSTICISM AND MAMANG DAI'S *RIVER POEMS*

-Dr Chandan Kumar Panda

Mysticism is a kind of perception which observes the phenomenal world in a different light. It arrives at a meaning which is not ordinarily noticed. The phenomenal undergoes a subjective transformation. The ordinary reaches the height of epiphany. Mamang Dai in her *River Poems* represents the phenomenal world of Arunachal Pradesh in a mystical manner. This mysticism is not a choice. It happens. The collocation of the natural beauty of Arunachal Pradesh and its deep-rooted connect with the people and the language in which she embodies those takes her poems to a different height. At that height, her poetry seems mystical. Most interestingly, with Dai the narration of the actual assumes a different dimension. In her word pictures there seemingly coexists a sensibility which renews the givenness of things. The given receives a kind of significance which bears the instances and indications of mysticism. Therefore, this paper intends to explore the dimensions of mysticism in her *River Poems*.

In Dai's mystical experience, river essentially is the substratum. Its geographical and cultural significance in the lives of the natives adds substantially to her poetic perception. Dai's aesthetics of river emanates from her deep biological and cultural engagement with the natural environment. Her constant companionship with that environment both as an onlooker and a

participant inspires her art. She writes what she sees and experiences. The empirical and the intuitive connect with nature determines her poetic representation. In that science of representation, her language sometimes crosses the border of mimetic logic and becomes mystical. This act of becoming is driven by spontaneity and the depth of experience. The intuitive intimacy with the phenomenal inspired by the convention seems to have given her the necessary imaginative elevation to reach the borderline between the metaphorical and the mystical. In "The Missing Link" Dai refers to the Siang River which topographically acts as a connecting link between the Tsangpo river of Tibet and the Brahmaputra of Assam. In her poetic narration, the river which glides curvatuously from the ancient land of red-robed men suggesting Tibet and Buddhism seems to have mystically been glistened by the "fire of the first sun". The light of dawn graces the river with the beauty of illumination,

... the great river that turned turning
with the fire of the first sun,
away from the old land of red robbed men... (2004, 11)

In Dai's romantic perception of nature, there persists a poetic proposition of immanence of divinity. She makes this proposition amply verifiable in her "River Poems":

The sun brands the eastern mountains.
The flash summer revealed/intricate nature,
divinity in trees... (2004,13)

The intuitive perception of divine pervasiveness in nature is itself a romantic and mystical. Mysticism does not necessarily mean the foregrounding of the divine essence. Mysticism also pertains to a kind of iridescence that prevails in nature. The observation of that iridescence is not a common perception. It requires a degree of deep involvement with nature to notice that dimension. The rhetorical question she presents in her poem "Ties" concerning the breath and sweetness of nature suggests her oneness with nature:

Who brought me back/ to taste the mountains,
the breath of these hills, at sunrise to sip
the sweetness of this light? (2004, 14)

The Cartesian scientific logic of human-nature dualism and the Enlightenment project of radical divisionism which prevail until today in the domain of critical humanities get the befitting critique from Dai. In her humanist and ecosophical thinking nature-human cohesion or conciliation finds the finest expression. This acceptance of cohesion is extended to the point of acknowledging the presence of universal being and of time in nature,

In these hills,
the centre of being,
one by one
voices are extinguished. (Dai 2004, 14-15)

The beginning and end of human time is encoded in the being of nature. The voices that receive amplification and the

voices which whimper anchor their destiny in nature. The fragility of human existence - from 'is' to 'is not'-and human contingency are etched in the primordial being of nature. The lack of self-realization and modern human commitment to artificial advancement seems to have widened the human-nature divide. In the existential philosophy of Dostoevsky, one notices the increasing human alienation from that oneness of universal being,

...the isolation that prevails everywhere... has not fully developed, not reached its limit yet. For everyone strives to keep his individuality as apart as possible, wishes to secure the greatest possible fullness of life for himself; but meantime all his efforts result not in attaining fullness of life but self-destruction, for instead of self-realisation he ends by arriving at complete solitude. (1950, 363)

The mysterious envelope of nature housing spirits is presented in the poem "Rain":

In the sound of rain
is contained
all the spirit of the jungle. Living, breathing
crushed, regenerative
dark, always watchful. (2004, 25)

Human civilization at the edge of nature remains unaware of its depth. In the same poem, she rejoices the therapeutics of

nature. Nature heals. Nature-human binary is unnatural. There is no such borderline between the nature and civilization. Human civilization is nature and in nature. The categorical dualism is a scientific construct. In Dai's poetic vision nature unburdens. It heals by its beauty. The assortment of beauty and healing smell and sound relieves the senses dulled by worries and anxieties. This curative dimension of nature is not an accidental one. It is a design. On the curative dimension of nature, Rousseau writes in

Emile,

For want of knowing how to cure himself, let the child know how to be sick. This art takes the place of the other and is often much more successful. It is nature's art. When an animal is sick, it suffers in silence and keeps quiet. Now one does not see more sickly animals than men. How many people whose disease would have spared them and whom time by itself would have cured have been killed by impatience, fear, anxiety, and, above all, remedies? I will be told that animals, living in a way that conforms more to nature, ought to be subject to fewer ills than we are. (1979, 55)

Nature is never a victim of chance. Chance is an itinerary in the human catalogue. It dominates the human world as the latter is characterized by ambitions and aspirations. Where there is ambition there is pain. Pain is the consequence of the non-

fulfilment of ambition. The world of nature does not inhere ambition. The matrix of fulfilment and non-fulfilment and their intersecting conflicts hardly disturb the design of nature. The nature of nature is to reveal. It reveals its beauty. The beauty that nature so gracefully manifests is to heal humanity from the anxieties of existence. Teleology and causality govern nature. The graceful manifestation of nature's beauty bears teleology of enhancing human happiness. The beautiful nature serves the purpose of producing an ecosystem which aims at providing happiness at every step of human development. But conversely, such a unique design of nature is overlooked by the humanity that sets its goal on achieving something other than happiness. Happiness which should have preceded every human endeavour seems to have become an outcome. There is enough happiness by sheer looking into the grace of nature. It seems that such a vision of happiness is absent in modern human perception. The joy that nature ensures is never found elsewhere. The calm and assertive beauty of nature finds no comparable. The poet feels herself filled in nature:

In the rain the camellias bloom.

The incense of pine

fills the sense again.

Again, the scales are balanced

between joy and pain. (2004, 25)

The immediacy of nature's grace is an urgent requirement for the safety of human civilization. The latter seems to be

corrupted by untameable greed. The same urgency is equally felt by Arne Naess who describes the indispensability of nature for human peace in *Ecology, Community and Lifestyle: Outline of an Ecosophy*, "When we go into nature, we often hear that there 'one can be oneself. This seems to imply that one isn't pressured by nature, one is left in peace'." (1898, 62)

In a mystical experience, the apparently contraries complement each other. The poet perceives the fragrance of light that captures the horizon. It is not an ordinary perception. This perception is constituted by the beauty of difference. The fragrance is never a property of light. But in the eyes of a mystic, the alogical becomes the logic. Science does not determine a mystic's vision. Dai may not be a mystic in the conventional sense of the term. However, she does not need the formalism of mysticism to testify her art as mystical. The language of her poetry, primarily of her narration of nature, expresses a certain depth of feeling which borders on mysticism,

There is a fragrance of light

that travels the horizon,

a ghost of tenderness that glids the sky.

Like a secret inhalation,

when I remember,

the sky covers the world

in a stealth of longing. (Dai 2004, 28)

The depth of longing changes the perception of the poet. In that height of ecstacy, the environment undergoes an

epiphanic makeover. The tenderness of longing extends to the tenderness of the external world that envelops the poet. The stitched boundaries are torn apart. A sameness of experience both within and without forms a totality. The sense of a totality is mystical. Dai's poetry does not suffer from obscurity or abstraction because she does not deliberately try to be a mystic. Mysticism in her poetry is a product of her deep emotional engagement with nature. Nabina Das contextualizing Mamang Dai's poetry in the article entitled "The Body is the Sum of Its Parts" published in *Economic and Political Weekly* writes, "The direction NE poetry take are, therefore, those of a shaman in search of the elemental." (2014, 85) Friedrich Holderlin, the German poet, in his poem, "The Archipelago" shares similar perception of nature and for him nature is that vital force which connects the phenomenal world in a string of unity,

Life, all of life, has filled with the sense of God
And everywhere nature returns to her children,
the old
Fulfilment returns and as if from a hill of springs
Blessings water the seedling soul of the people. (1990, 34)

In the poem "Small Towns and the River" Dai speaks up the inherence of soul in river. River, being a phenomenon of nature, inheres a soul. It is not just a water body governed by gravity. For every human civilization a river holds a decisive cultural significance. For the animistic traditions, river is not only a life-line but also a physical incarnation of the universal

soul. The school of pantheism believes in the immanence of divinity in the various phenomena of nature. Dai seems here more of a pantheist as she perceives the presence of spirit in nature. The beauty of nature signifies the inherence of the subtle reality of soul. The mist that clings to the mountaintops and the water that flows in the river share the same soul, "The river has a soul." (2004, 29) In the same poem, the poet discusses the destiny of the human soul while describing the death rites. In the animistic traditions, the sun is not only the centre of the heliocentric universe but also the god from which the universe sprang from and to which it goes. Following the same argument in the context of the people who follow the animistic culture, the human soul comes from the sun and returns to it after the completion of its duration. In some of the tribal death, rites is placed pointing to the west. The logic apparently is that the western horizon symbolizes in the geocentric conception the setting of the sun and the closure of the day. In the western horizon the sun sinks in order to rise in the east. The setting coincides with rising. The sun sets to rise so does the human soul. The implication of placing the dead in the direction of the west is to help the soul to complete its circle by rising again. The soul walks into the house of the sun which is in the east. This seems to be the animistic belief in the trajectory of the human soul and its teleology of mingling with the sun in the eastern horizon. The sun being the house of the souls explains the religious importance of nature:

The dead are placed pointing west,
When the soul rises
it will walk into the golden east,
into the house of the sun. (2004, 30)

In the animistic traditions, nature is believed to be sacred. Therefore, it is worshipped. The rivers, the sky, the mountains, the stars and the trees and animals are taken to be sacred. The fact of their sacredness makes the ecological balance intact. The daily interaction with the phenomena of nature with fear and reverence strengthens the native bonding with nature. Revering nature as a cultural imperative is one of the beauties of animism. The cultural regulatory against human violence upon nature pacifies the human instinctual urge for domination. Dai's cultural experience of the sacredness of nature seems to have impacted her mystical vision. Mamang Dai in her essay "On Creation Myths and Oral Narratives" discusses what constitutes the aesthetic essence of the North-East:

The North-east region of the country is known for its scenic beauty, and most the stories here focus on its myths of creation: the birth of mountains, stars, good and evil, and the birth of man; and those stories convey a sense of grandeur in concept and feeling. (2005, 4)

In the poet's mystical experience, the mountain seems to be an earth woman rising in her attempted height to reach her sky-lover, "The mountain is a disguise/of earth woman rising to

meet her sky lover." (Dai 2004,31) The earth swells in love to meet its blue lover. In the tradition of nature mysticism there has been recurrent efforts to establish this equation between the earth and the sky. They have been humanized in terms of adding the love motif into it. The mountain and the sky form a love-unity in mystic literature. Their proximity and distance entail the variability of love.

The poem "Sleepwalking" seems more of a modern poem. However, it has a line that seems to be one of the fascinating lines she writes, "The wind is a gesture of love." (44) In the lovers' discourse wind bears a gesture of love. Relation gets murkier as habit brings casual indifference. Love turns sour when the lover expects it to exist beyond its duration. But in nature there exists neither duration nor expectation. Therefore, love remains. Nature holds enough suggestions of love. Only a mystic can witness the inherence of love in nature. The music of love that nature untiringly presents needs the ear to relish. The ears of a mystic capture them. Pain is the effect of the pursuit of permanence in the contingent. Seeking in human love the permanence of a feeling is a painful choice. A mystic does because she feels every nerve of nature. The experience of a presence in nature that is felt by Dai and her attempt to humanize it bear certain similarity with William Wordsworth. Wordsworth in his perception of nature finds a presence. He discusses that in his poem "Lines written a few Miles above Tintern Abbey":

And I have felt
A presence that disturbs me with the joy
Of elevated thoughts; a sense sublime
Of something far more deeply interfused,
Whose dwelling is the light of setting suns,
And the round ocean, and the living air,
And the blue sky, and in the mind of man,
A motion and a spirit, that impels
All thinking things, all objects of all thought,
And rolls through all things. (2010, 51)

Quite similarly and with characteristic philosophical complexity Spinoza in "Short Treatises on God, Man and his Well-being" defines nature:

UNDERSTANDING: I for my part consider Nature only in its totality as infinite, and supremely perfect, but you, if you have any doubts about it, ask Reason, she will tell you.

REASON: To me the truth of the matter is indubitable, for if we would limit Nature then we should, absurdly enough, have to limit it with a mere Nothing; we avoid this absurdity by stating that it is One Eternal Unity, infinite, omnipotent, etc., that is, that Nature is infinite and that all is contained therein; and the negative of this we call Nothing. (2002, 46)

Dai's perception of divine inherence of nature and her leanings towards mysticism share similar thought process. Wordsworth, Spinoza and Dai though belonged to different time and geography shared a thinking that placed nature at a high

ground of divinity and sacredness. May it be Spinoza's rational perception of nature or Wordsworth's and Dai's imaginative; there prevails a commonality of understanding which recognizes the supreme importance of nature in the human-nature continuum.

In "Enigma" Dai narrates the beauty of nature that inspires madness. The golden beams of the slanting sun on its westward journey transform the earth by the magic of light and offer the impression of the earth as a vast mustard field. The entire horizon looks so mystical by the paint of yellow. The maturing sun tilts to sink spreading mildly its yellowed elegance. The maturing beauty of the sun towards the closure of the day suggests not the oneness of this beautiful expression. It tempts the earth for an unalterable repetition. In nature beauty is not contingent. It remains. But on the contrary the human beauty is time's gift. It is in a state of transit. It comes to go permanently. It neither remains nor gets stuck. In nature beauty is not a gift. It is the essence. In nature beauty is not an attribute or a quality. The poet leaps with joy at the sight of that splendid view and nurtures the delight of participation. The joy that maddens the heart of the poet seeks union with that beautiful phenomenon. This is mysticism. A mystic joins that melody of light by the sheer delight of her vision. A mystic is not just an onlooker. She participates in that ecstasy of light by the power of her imagination:

The yellow mustard is a field of gold.

The slanting sun promises to return
tilting the day like a temptation.

Facing this splendor
the heart that is madness
chooses to return to its enclosure. (2004, 56)

In "The Balm of Time" the poet presents her faith in animism and pantheism. She declares her faith in the presence of spirit in nature. The world of nature is not governed by accident or chance. There is immanence of a spiritual principle which inspires its physical manifestation. The animistic tradition divinizes the phenomena of nature. It is a cultural ecosystem which houses many gods. The elements of nature are animated presences. The forest faith that believes in the cultural binaries of good and evil and the presence of the spirit in nature and the beautiful dawn first to show its face giving the impression of a dream world is the faith that the poet ascertains her faith in. Dai's mysticism springs from her profound faith in nature. This profundity of faith transforms her vision of nature:

Yes, I believe in gods.

In the forest faith of good and evil,
spirits of the river,
and the dream world of the dawn. (2004, 57)

She feels in the wind voices and hears the whisperings of spirits.

In "Days" Dai refers to a village that freezes in deep winter. Winter fills it with snow. It makes the landscape look

shiny and vibrant with cold. The scattered presence of snow
among the trees offers the illusion of laughter:

Sparkling clear cold.

Laughter among the trees.

In the snow frozen villages

there were those days. (2004, 74)

The poet here seems recollecting those days spent in some village which got petrified at night with the bitterness of cold. Those ash cold mornings seem to have brought to the poet some sad but indispensable memories. However, her nature narration seems quite animated. But the smiles of those old women in that same petrified village speak to the poet their deep intimacy with the land. Revering nature may look pagan to the eyes of the Abrahamic religions but in the words of the poet the hills and the rocks and the rivers are full of life. There is eternity in them. People may change and may also change their culture. The rivers and hills once worshiped may later be called pagan but nothing changes the beauty and divinity of nature. The nomenclature may go on shifting with the change of culture but nature does not change with culture. In Dai's words nature continues to exude the radiance of eternity. The life and spirit in nature continue to pulsate even with the change of culture. The transition in culture does not coincide with the transition in nature. Human civilization undergoes change with the introduction or imposition of different variables of culture but nature hardly follows these variables. Nature does not pursue the cultural logic of a people or

a civilization. It follows the logic of unchanged continuity. Culture by its nature is subject to change but nothing can inflict change in nature. Its change is its continuity. Seasons change but they change to continue. Therefore, Dai in her undying reverence for nature observes the cultural transition in terms of dislocating the human faith in nature but the attitudinal change cannot alter the divine inherence in nature:

And now
the smiles of old women
tell me,
in these pagan hills
full of God's/living rock
and the eternal river, ... (2004, 74)

A mystic humanizes nature. The artificial and rational subject-object divide loses its clinical nature in the mystic's love for union. A deep bonding is arrived at. The mystic feels herself integrated with the cosmic oneness. The oneness of everything is the primal cosmic design. A mystic fulfils that design. Dai's humanist and pantheistic approach to nature embodies enough suggestions of her role as a mystic. The dark hills appear impenetrable and mysterious. Clouds flirting with moon and brooding of nature over the creation and the moon spreading silvery whiteness giving the illusion of winter in summer, the arms of summer and the voices of dawn are some of the experiences which are apparently mystical. These are not commonplace experiences. They suggest the poet's mystic

vision. In the alchemy of mysticism nature does not remain just an objective exterior. It develops a perception that unites the phenomenal world with one thread of interdependence and mutuality. The inner coherence of things gets articulated in that perception. The vision that borders on mysticism includes every aspect of the universal being. In that vision of coherence, the oneness of universal ego is realized. In Dai's poetry nature is not just an ocular perception. It involves her complete being. Therefore, nature seems so animated in her poetry.

Human-nature integration seems more vital and apparent in tribal communities. Their constant companionship with nature and the genuine awe and reverence that they cultivate for nature suggest a kind of strong ecological bonding. That bonding is not just superficially and ostensibly orchestrated in the tribal rigid and elaborate rites and rituals. Nature is the most primary and primal presence in the tribal ritual. Such ritual ostentation may sound a kind of strong ecological correctness that those communities maintain. Ecological correctness is not a theory for them. It is part of their culture. Therefore, Dai calls the people who live in close contact with nature as children of rain, "We are the children of the rain/ the cloud woman..." (Dai 2004, 79) In the tribal consciousness nature is the source. Nature has always occupied the role of a mother. Nature is the giver.

To conclude, it seems that in Dai's poetry there is a strong poetic urge towards mysticism. In her narration of nature there persists a will to intimacy with nature. Her narration does not

seem to be objective. Her deep subjective engagement with nature expresses her profound emotional bonding. The language that she uses often makes attempt to humanize and divinize nature. The intimate language that she uses to depict nature bears indications of her approach to mysticism. In her ecological vision nature is not just a protective membrane for the human existence. Nature is a presence. It inspires and guides humanity towards a sustainable environment of unity. With nature she constantly seeks an interaction. That urge for interaction seems quite compelling in her poetry.

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