

“The Hidden Valleys of My Home”: Home, Identity, and Environmental Justice in the Select Works of Mamang Dai

Paban Chakraborty

The quoted text in my title is taken from the Prologue to Mamang Dai's *The Legends of Pensam* where she says that the helicopter traces an invisible route over the landscape as she traverses the unknown territory and the clouds “race past and ahead of us, drawing us into the hidden valleys of my home” (Dai 3). Man, from the beginning of time, has been drawn into these hidden spaces. To some they are geographical and spatial explorations and to others they are simply home. Home is a term that has been explored from numerous dimensions. It is a spatio-temporal hybrid that we construct for the sole purpose of simplification. But underneath this benign term lies conflict and tension. Homelands are always imaginary as Salman Rushdie says in *Imaginary Homelands* and never a whole, “we are not gods but wounded creatures, cracked lenses, capable only of fractured perceptions” (Rushdie 12). This fractured representation also tends to represent a fractured identity. Retracing and retrieving identity is not a new project as this has been done with postcolonial and postmodern rebuttal of earlier concepts of identity formation. In this article, I want to stress on the concept of identity in relation to nature through a set of theories known together as Environmental Justice. Postcolonial identity formation has been seen as a form of protest, as a way of reclaiming land and the culture it gives birth to. I will also show that identity crisis arises from one's separation with nature. Constant struggles between the original inhabitants of the land and the power that tries to control it for the resources within has always been a part of history. Post-colonialism tries to rebuild identity through modes of storytelling. This process is seen as a tool for reclamation. In this article, I want to use that same tool and connect it with recent theories of Environmental Justice.

Environmental justice concerns believe in an interdisciplinary approach to man-nature relationships. It shows how our technology is not adequate in controlling nature. Technology has been a tool for advancing civilizations into more complicated relationships with nature. Instead of control, it overpowers nature. Recent developments of natural crisis have proven how wrong we were in our madness for control. Many aboriginals have shown how they have survived the harshest of landscapes without any such new age machines. Environmental justice is not only about giving justice to some of the deprived and displaced individuals who have always been seen as belonging to a backward community as they had not accepted the modernization of land. It is also about showing how our grand projects with our power to control technology is nothing compared to their faith and belief slowly crafted for centuries. Modern power equations have shifted in favor of technology but Environmental Justice seeks to flush out the guilty party. With colonial invasions and state control, these marginalized people have almost forgotten their way of life. The injustice done to the people in such position and their belief is in dire need of addressing. The protest is not only against power structure but against the very use of technology for controlling nature. Their mode of protest is different, it is their faith and relationship with nature that shows how man can exist alongside it and not dominate it. But the mode of protest must be upheld to the world. The best tool for doing so, I will show, lies in storytelling.

Mamang Dai, who I read here, uses language and storytelling, the most ancient of technologies, as a form of protest. Using the same tool of modernization, the niched and deprived societies and cultures in her fictional world are upheld to the world to prove how futile the worldview of modernity was, drawn so by maps and territorialized by race. The fractured identity and plight of these lands are one with their people, subdued by language and power. It is time that this tool became more than a postcolonial weapon. The fractured perception of landscape, as Rushdie says, needs to be represented, as “re-describing a world is the necessary first step towards changing it” (Rushdie 14). Mythmaking, although has reclaimed cultures and narratives, nature needs to be seen from a different viewpoint. What I want to point out is that positions must not assess *the* land but see it as a form of protest too. The voiceless must come in contact with the voiced to reclaim identity. Literature stands upon conflictual grounds as it is both a

model of progress and a medium of protest. It can also act its part if called for, and I want to place it in a relation to the activism of Environmental Justice. A struggle for voicing the plights of others has gripped writers from around the world. In this article I will point out that literary storytelling can act as a medium for carrying out Environmental Justice. A step towards such Justice, I will argue, can also be achieved through relocating the man-nature relationship of these backward cultures into the main-stream history of the world.. Environmental Justice seeks to question the position of technology, man's charade of control that has led us to the ruinous present; but it also must question the historicity of identifying nature. Here I want to show how environmental justice can be traced through the medium of storytelling to unwind historical identity of both land and humans. One thing that is certain with environmental justice as a concept and as practice is that the relation between man and nature cannot go in one direction. It is by claiming place and space that man and nature can co-exist and rebuild themselves.

The hidden chasms of Mamang Dai's world are the hidden words and traditions she upholds through her narratives. This pristine landscape exists only in-between the dominant culture and the culture of the people of this land. Before beginning the novel *The Legends of Pensam* Mamang Dai associates the word 'Pensam' with in-betweenness and also relates it to the secret chasms of the heart. It is through her representation of the silent movements of the rivers and the dense forests that these valleys rewrite the history of creation. The people of this land root their history to the history of nature. Their life is a gift from Mother Nature. The secret garden is woven inside the heart and not on a map. Whereas a map ravishes with its abstract lines, the lines inside the heart are untraceable. Cartography cannot trace this Home of which the author speaks.

My immediate issue at hand is to trace the relation between her modes of storytelling and the idea of Environmental Justice. A conglomeration of many perspectives, Environmental Justice can be explored from many sides. The plurality exalted in David Schlosberg's book *Defining Environmental Justice*, a plurality that does not bow down to a theoretical centrism; it is a form of protest in itself. The plurality of explorations and linguistic representations of homelands are voices of protest from those communities which have been sidelined in the highway of history. Their voice is the voice of nature and its hidden chasms; the ripples on the water are the silent words of these in-between spaces. These hidden, unuttered voices also need to be accounted for. I aim to understand the notion of plurality here. Rather than looking at the vast pool of theories I want to look at lived experiences. The advancement of civilization has ravaged these pristine landscapes and left them only visible through the trails of adventurers and colonial powers. These homes have been destroyed and set on fire, entire villages burned in man's ruthless hunt for truth. How are we to reconcile these hidden spaces yet to be discovered to the already existing voices? It is their experiences, their myths and legends that narrate their existence. It is their lived space of everyday life which tells their tale. Their looms are no less inferior to words. Their oral repository is no less inferior in richness to the written words of history. Here, I shall first try to introduce the concept of Environmental Justice in light of its social aspects and uphold literature as a form of protest and as a medium for securing identity. I shall look into the tales for justification. Exploring the web of complex social relations, I find that literary representations are adept in narrating the tales of these lands hidden in-between other worlds and other words. Humans share a deep bond with nature and the lines that exist in-between are the voices of this imagined bond. This hidden valley is sometimes an imaginary place and sometimes very real. This place can be immune to the changes and rebuilt by songs and stories.

In the 'Introduction' to *Environmental Justice in the New Millennium*, Filomina C. Steady says, "Environmental justice represents the history and continuing struggle of ordinary people for their civil, spatial and human rights as members of a global ecological community" (Steady 1). She further adds that it "challenges discrimination and disparities in the allocation of benefits and burdens of economic development" (1). Her work is among many which look into the inequality of benefits, and the illicit treatment of indigenous and minority communities regarding environment and gender inequalities. The history of domination is also a history of exploitation. Humans and nature have been exploited for the purpose of turning them into labor and wealth. This has led to the destruction of the environment,

pollution, toxicity and unequal distribution. Hegemonic domination and ideological structures have been instrumental in this race for progress. She also refers to “. . . ideologies of domination and ‘Structural Expendability’ [which] still shape the dominant development paradigms” (6). Most of the injustice that is made has social bearings and other social markers to indicate that this grassroots movement needs to challenge these social issues. It should uphold the rights of human values and equality towards nature. Sustainable agriculture and land use are dominant issues in this field. In a chapter of the book, Glenn S. Johnson talks about the “voice” of the socio-ecologically deprived and exploited communities which needs to be heard and made into a part of the decision-making process (20). This movement needs to speak against the random environmental degradation that has gripped the world. Another issue is racism and how it dismantles equality in communities of color. This new movement speaks against oppression and is the voice of the minority groups and women activists. It believes in the equal sharing of the environment. Social inequality stems from the ideas of enlightenment as the more dominant races chase to equip the so-called savages. This movement is based on social activism, and any form of activism requires the help of language. Celene Krauss relates to the African American women reconstructing their experiences and, in the process, reconstructing nature. Pashington Obeng portrays the brilliant idea of the landscape not only as a dwelling place for the people but also as “scripts and stories of their lives” (205). Nature is their narrative and the medium for identity. Tribal communities have a form of co-existence with nature but “dispossession of their lands . . . [and] limitation placed on the use of forest produce, and land use in general” have dislocated their culture and identity (205). The land is not only a part of their physical existence but also a part of their cultural repository, their identity. Their memories, myths and their reverence for nature is their right to these properties. What Obeng calls “counterhegemonic struggles” can also be used for the oral narratives of these people, to protest with words against other words, to establish an alternate identity (209).

To further this cause, let me give another example. Elizabeth Ammons in *Brave New Words* shows us how words become a form of protest against injustice. She protests against the dictum that “we now live in a postrace world” and declares its falsity (Ammons 79). She views race as “both a fiction and a reality” which demands a form of activism and social understanding (80). The underprivileged have raised their voices and it is now time for them to be heard. She sees Environmental Justice as another seed of postmodern plurality with a vengeance. We must see the use of language as a form of protest and not as play. Environmental Justice takes the two budding sides of environmental concern and social struggle to form a weapon more powerful than environmentalism. She gives the examples of many books to show how indigenous people have a greater form of knowledge in terms of the environment – forms generally ignored by western science. These can be seen as a prelude to what I state in this paper. These relationships are embedded with harmony between man and nature, and their tale is far superior to the narrative of western progress. The principle of Environmental Justice is to explore inequality from different perspectives. We must find the path based on experience and lived ideas that will dare to raise the voice, and form a new dimension. Literary representations of these spaces need to counter established ideas. She refers to Vandana Shiva’s words that we must also look back towards “local economies and agriculture that will rebuild human and planetary health” (qtd. in Ammons 148). Looking back towards ancestral lore and mythical creation as well as processes of conserving nature can be a way of reconstructing the world and along with it identity, fragmented, complicated and plural.

Mamang Dai’s works appear as silent whispers of Arunachal Pradesh. She carefully dislodges the stones of history to unearth the hidden places of her home. In doing so, she does not shy away from the realistic descriptions of struggles and challenges in her place. In *Arunachal Pradesh: The Hidden Land*, she traces the history of this slow changing land and attempts rather a conscious admixture of literary and historical facts. Although a work of non-fiction, the balance of power shifts towards storytelling. She relates her deep passion for this home and its people as she says, “The land was our birthplace. We worked the land and where we were was our home” (Dai 9). The transition from a land traceable only by the rivers and forests to a modern state was dramatic, “Today, change has come like a steam roller” (9).

But amidst this change the niches that are reflected only by their memories could be lost forever. What she calls “a collection of travel notes” is in fact a step towards the preservation of a rich cultural history (9). She hints at the isolation of the land which has been instrumental to the survival of her place as she says, “a way of life was established that enabled the different communities to survive in a harsh terrain for centuries with very little contact with the outside world” (9). In spite of the rugged land and very little chances of farming the people have made “a serene and solemn reconciliation with the environment” (9). Tribal systems have functioned properly without help from the outside. She hopes for an alternate voice to counter the mainstream depiction of tribal people, and their rituals as totem and taboo. The creation myth of the earth and the sky reveals a series of wonderful tales that reconstruct the land and shows its deep-rooted connection with nature. The exploration of the great river systems made this undiscovered land a part of the map and “Agents of the East India Company along with surveyors and cartographers pushed forward to explore this territory” (14). The aim was the commercial success of tea cultivation that covered the land of Assam. Their dream was to transform, as the author says, “the rich Brahmaputra river valley into an immeasurable garden of silk and fragrant tea” (15). The tribes somehow resisted but not for long. Many roads were built during the Second World War but they cannot match the serpentine path of great rivers.

All the tribes have different rituals but one thing draws them together - Nature. Their history is an oral one, carefully crafted throughout the ages. Their origins talk about places yet to be recorded in the maps as she says, “very often the names of places recorded in memory in the form of legends cannot be identified with anything recorded in maps” (19). This memory is a form of protest. Their names and origins correspond with nature and their identities are inseparable from the crevices of nature. The rich natural wealth has attracted many a hand throughout the centuries. It is a place for many endangered flora and fauna tangled with “root, vine and decaying vegetation” (25). Even the forest is commercially valuable as, “the Hollong is an important commercial timber species” (28). Their connection with nature is reciprocal as she says, “The tribes of Arunachal Pradesh have always lived off the forest without posing any threat to the ecosystem” (28). Their practices are deeply involved with nature. Commercial greed has led to a reduction of the forest area causing a misbalanced ecosystem. In their old practice, “to cut down a tree was taboo” (29). Now a big part of the system is under threat of destruction due to development (road building) and the influx of migrant labors. But the origin of this land is from imagination and their rich history is contained in their oral literature. This relationship with nature can only be explained through “mythological belief . . . projected into lived reality through natural surroundings and human imagination” (49). They experience nature through their everyday practice. Nature has also acted against many incursions into this hidden valley. They have lived happily in isolation using old cultivation techniques they feel are the gift of the gods as she says, “The Monpas use their land very productively” (64). Even the food they are provided with has different versions of tales. New state regulations have been implemented against use of natural resources, cutting them off from their roots. Even their faith is related to nature as she says, “the Donyi-polo faith is an attempt to give meaning to life through intellectual and ideological pursuit based on nature” (86). They stress on the role of memory and songs as something that cannot be taken away from them; they are the memories of this enchanted land. The word ‘Identity’ would not suffice to express this collective voice. These faiths support a life system to help them survive in this harsh environment. For them faith is indistinguishable from agricultural practices. Added to it is the role of the storyteller in their festivals. The “miri”, as they are called, “comes to remind people of the meaning and significance of rituals and restores harmony and understanding between . . . man and the forest” (100). All the land stems from the design of a piece of cloth dotted with beautiful designs made by Hambrumai, the legendary weaver. The patterns are the patterns of nature; the path of the river, the height of the mountains and the patience of the trees. The procession of civilization has come “clawing through the jungle and blowing up mountains” (114). But with the new comes the concern of “erosion of traditional values” and “the destruction of the environment” (118). In these times of change, amidst the horrible hunger and greed it is the value of their memories that they must understand and try to uphold them through representation.

To differentiate between faith and nature is impossible for the people of the land. In the author's note from *The Legends of Pensam*, Mamang Dai says that "the Adis practice an animistic faith that is woven around forest ecology and co-existence with the natural world" (xi). She talks about a time of "singing forest" and a village heaving with life (Dai 4). To delve deep into their myths is to indulge in the play of nature. The story of Hoxo falling from the sky amidst all the green; Biribik, the water serpent and enchanting premonitions are common elements. Stories of hunting and creation are woven into the memories of the tribes. They all live like Hoxo "in a timeless zone" (24). They practice farming and "Every household has plots here for growing vegetables and herbs" (27). Some forage the surrounding forest for sustenance. But there is no violence used to unearth the secrets of nature. Trees grow to stupendous heights and are as old as creation itself. But this green and golden time goes by as the premonitory rain brings along disease and decay. We hear of the Migluns [white men] for the first time in the form of "The first white priests, surveyors and soldiers . . ." (37). Times were changing, their faiths and beliefs were being challenged by western determinacy. They were "digging a tunnel right across the world" (38). The skies were being filled with shells that reverberated throughout the land. She beautifully describes the western spirit of dominance as they mounted up the distant hills contending with the mud and the mosquitoes and trampling the indecipherable jungle. Hoxo's story tells us of these difficult times when distrust and misbelief separated the branches of the same tree. It is a time when "thunder of cargo trucks and bulldozers" were heard and "the jungle burst into flame" (40). The Migluns desperately dragged "the wretched road across the mutilated hills" that took a great toll on the population (40). Although "the big trees were brought down", their oral culture remains as rich as before as Hoxo relates to a time when "there had existed a green and virgin land under a gracious and just rule" (42). The spirits living in those ancient trees also suffered displacement. Their homes were destroyed, "they were homeless" (42). In the progressive rush, civilization "hacked its way through the chaos of virgin forest" (48). The west has seen these places as savage and animalistic neglecting the rich diversity of ecological and cultural representations.

Mamang Dai quotes a sahib's notebook saying that, "the forest is like an animal" (52). Surveys conducted in the areas only traced a bunch of futile lines on paper and she says that "[a] new picture would appear. Words would be written . . . but no one would ever know the other words, the secret whispers, tender, intense, spoken at first light" (54-55). In spite of all these, the "Keyum", the nothingness, surrounds every effort (56). She talks about the spark of imagination that grew into a shining stream which engendered the stories and creatures of the land. If we continue this process, the concept of identity stems from the same imagination. For the women it is the lines that are traced by the hands of a man but these traces are incomplete. The in-between spaces are those of the mother, the wife and the fertile earth ravaged by the greed of man. Her culture represents women as gifts, their plight as the plight of the earth mother. They too have suffered under the administrative control. Their voice is commingled with the whispers of the land. She intentionally refers to the phrase "the belly of the hills" to look at the impregnating change the women had to suffer, and women like Nenem, the old lady, wondered if they would survive the change (101). Her fate is sealed, and as "she looked at the trees she recalled all the fragments of the past . . ." (119). Time changes but the stories go on taking new shapes and forms as Losi's mother advises her to keep the box of stories so that she can "shape them, color them and pull them out any time" (123). "The thunder of hooves crashing through the jungle" cannot defile this tale, this lived experience (125). The earthquake that hits the land is perhaps a natural consequence of this steady injustice. The people were losing their stories and searching for new settlements. This rich land became "dry and bony, and ragged" (137). Even their small villages take an opposite stance as they defy the concept of the map. They remain untraceable. The only road these people knew were "the green-and-silver vein" of rivers (146). The roads made the connections easier to establish. Even the transmission wires, new administrative buildings and modern roads could not unlock the mysteries of this hidden land. The land was no longer their ancestral property as, "[t]hey had surrendered ancestral lands to the government" and this new identity was replacing their fate (156). She refers to the destruction reigning havoc on the land, "[I]and was being stolen. Forests were being cut and logs floated away down the river"

(163). The history of the land was being taken away from them but words do remain, stronger than the land. The forest gods have fled making way for the demons of destruction. The only way to reach this mythical land is remembrance as she says if “a person forgets, he loses his soul” (189). These so-called peripheral people need to assert their identity through their oral history, their myths, legends and songs; through the appropriation of language to counter the centre. Storytelling and myth act for Mamang Dai and the people of the land as a counterhegemonic tool for reconstructing their identity and history.

This voice of protest, of narrativizing history is evident in almost all her works. In *The Black Hill* she narrates a historic tale of love and freedom and narrates the black hills erased by the fires of history. In the ‘Prologue’, Mamang Dai says that the story begins with “a man whose shoulders touched the sky” and ends with a story that is never ending as it can be told in many ways (Dai ix). The people understand the motive of the Migluns as they had heard the stories of subjugation. They come luring them with gifts and take away their land. Moi, a girl in the story, cannot understand their intentions as she asks impatiently: “What hungers drove them?”, but we all know the answer (Dai 21). They were determined to take a stand against the British who “may conquer the world but they will never take our land” (25). The story of Kajinsha and Gimur, the protagonists and the lovers in the story, reverberates throughout the land. We hear the historic event of the burning of the khampti village and their oppression. They were not inferior, neither their history nor their religion as they say that, “[w]e have a life and our lives are also ruled by gods” (139). As Kajinsha tells Krick, the Priest, the names of the gods and about their faith he laughs as he does not understand their religion. They do not need books to uphold their religion, they “read the land. The land is [their] book” (140). Nobody can read the land as they can, no one can decipher its secrets. The priest is baffled by this unyielding faith and the surrounding land. Their songs are their tales. Their scribe of memories is quite strong. They were brave men and women fighting for their right to survive. The difference between reading maps and reading the land itself is quite a lot. Krick describes the mountains as an army of ships and we know for sure that the land is their army, their guardian. Their stories are innumerable as their gods. They cannot be subdued by others. Their stories will forever be heard as “[e]very breath of wind that blew across the hills whispered a new story” (252). These are the stories of their bravery, they would stand and fight rather than surrender their right to the land. “[T]he burnt, black hill” (267) is just one instance of the impression left by the outsiders. These acts of aggression were subdued with force but the voices live on as Kajinsha says that he also has tales to tell, “*stories...words...I too have words* [italics by the author]” (288). Their identities cannot be erased by the dominance of culture as the plurality of voices assert different identities through unending tales. The earth and the sky are one with Kajinsha and Gimur, and their stories will live on forever. The most wonderful idea is admitted by the author herself as she says, “lives are ended, but a story-never” (294).

These traditional people have lived in harmony with nature for so many years. Their lives emulate the doctrine of nature. From Adis to Abor, from the Mishmi to the Apatani, all share this knowledge. For the reservoir of traditional knowledge, to which forests are sacred and animals are spirits or living souls, the injustice done seems unfair. Their wisdom, clothes and weaving all are a representation of nature. In a time when voices of protest are being heard from minorities, telling stories seems to be a logical trend. Through children’s lore she upholds the most important values of their lives. Myths of Arunachal Pradesh come alive in her stories. In *Once upon a Moontime: From the Magical Story World of Arunachal Pradesh*, for instance, she retells the story of creation. The life of the Adis is intertwined with nature like the rippum vine. The story of Techimdum, a god, creating the land, the path of the Lohit River following the Wild Cat and the weeping Dove, a mythical creature, are all beautifully crafted tales with which Mamang Dai weaves the history of these people. The burning up of the earth in the story, “The Sun and the Moon”, may also refer to global warming. The fields drying up, the farmers dying and people suffering all refer to the destruction of the earth and how it is restored by the myth of the land. She weaves a creation myth of her own. It is not the humans who own and discover the land but nature weaves a landscape as a cradle to nurture the humans. They are children of nature. We find the same reference to nature as the midwife during Hoxo’s birth in *The Legends of Pensam*. Another wonderful tale

is *Hambreelmai's Loom* which retells the birth of the Mishmi art of weaving. The woven patterns reflect the natural movements. These are the tales which guide the lives of these people. The loom of creation is never-ending as retelling these stories will forever renew the land like in a fertility cult.

Mamang Dai has tried to portray the hidden spaces of their lives through her tales. Her fiction and non-fictional works have a penchant for reworking past structures through modes of storytelling. Governmental laws and restrictions have limited these people and their access to the ancestral land; greed has corrupted them, and modern life has baffled them. Yet we see their eternal tales lived through their lives and their stories. Identity as a western concept provokes norms to mold every anomaly into a whole. Identity binds whereas storytelling frees the abused from the pangs of historical subjugation. Environmental Justice will be a big term for them; as to them the only justice is the law of nature. They do not form groups holding up placards, they do not block roadways to seek justice. They only weave stories to etch their lives within the hidden valleys of a mysterious land. Mamang Dai's intention in weaving stories can be taken as a mode of narrating the plight of these people. Science has been at pains to explain the natural mysteries people share with nature. They have devised methods to live in harmony intrinsic to their faith. What Dai suggests in her works is that we may learn from the wisdom and beliefs of simple people and understand their experiences as forms of protest. The new future is one of individual activism. Words are agents of change. We must let go of the idea of man as the protector/dominator and see man as part of nature. We must explore various rhythms of nature and society rather than depend upon the old. These 'in-between' places/spaces and their representations could be an answer. Only an interdisciplinary approach that looks at and is looked at in return can serve as a potent way through. From environmentalisms we have moved to a world interlinked with the human and the social, and in this context literary representations can relate to this complex equation. Whereas Environmental Justice as a theory relates to concepts, we must integrate or combine them with experiences. These experiences, lived and narrated, can become processes through which new perspectives can be realized. New stories can weave patterns into the old tales of suppression. This involvement is the invaluable history of the people, rewritten and reconstructed. A mythic landscape that was fractured is reconstructed through myths. Storytelling becomes that mythical tool. The power equation changes as the voices are narrated, and the storytellers tell the tales to relive the unvoiced past. The fractured identity is restored through retelling and remapping of the cultural heritage of these people.

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Paban Chakraborty
Senior Research Fellow,
Department of English, University of Calcutta
pawanfromkolkata@gmail.com
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