

## Linguistic Effacement and Women's Translational Agency in Arunachal Pradesh during the COVID-19 Lockdown: Reading Mamang Dai's The Inheritance of Words

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### Abstract

*With the rise of missionary, Hindi and English medium schools in Arunachal Pradesh, there is an everyday effacement of local language and literature. The familiar vernacular has slowly become defamiliar to the local people and this demands the need for translation. This is a very practical problem as expressed by Mamang Dai in her literary endeavours. Covid lockdown brought the intellectuals of the state together to write down their literature which is continually getting lost. In this paper, I have discussed the role of women writers and their contribution towards the development and revival of tribal folklore of Arunachal Pradesh. Their work adds to the corpus of literature of the North East and English literature on the whole. Mamang Dai in her edited book 'The Inheritance of Words' (2021) discusses the writings of different writers and their uniqueness lies in the fact that they look at the tribal life of their region through their lived experience and the special outlook and knowledge they have inherited from their mothers and grandmothers. Most of these writers have taken the recourse of English as their language of expression but their ethos can be placed in their mother tongue which is specific to their tribe. Mamang Dai's effort in collecting the several women writers and compiling them in this edition is indeed praiseworthy and adds to the growing tribe of North East literature.*

**Keywords:** *Everyday effacement of language, Arunachal Pradesh, women writers, folklore of North East, literature of North East.*

Arunachal Pradesh is everyday facing an effacement of the traditional language as very few people speak their mother tongue even at home. The lockdown acted as a creative space for bringing in the women writers of Arunachal Pradesh together. They shared their oral histories, tribal stories, beliefs, superstitions, and lullabies during the national lockdown to resist this effacement. Literature and historical legends from the area served as a vendor of goodwill among this literary tribe of women writers. Their combined effort adds to the feminist literary project or movement of the area. According to Edward Soja's concept of first space, these writers strongly put up geographical images of the cave, hut, cottage, jungle or the traditional hearth to name a few. According to Edward Soja's concept of second space which means the imagined spaces, the writers also dug up their memory to accommodate their tribal community stories which gets lost in the modern milieu. There is a continuous effort to literally preserve the culture of the area in this creative space. As Mamang Dai recalls in her 'Acknowledgements' that these group of writers worked through whatsapp and email to add up the lived realities with the mainstream narratives conforming to the third space

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realities of Soja. As an editor she confirms that “...through the slowness and isolation, believing that words, thoughts, poetry and prose will always be there to change space and time, offering communication and hope between people even in the darkest and most uncertain of times.” (Dai xi)

The quoted line “I am the woman lost in translation/ who survives” from Mamang Dai’s poem “the Voice of the Mountain” equates a mountain with a woman and further the woman is made parallel to a text. Women like the mountain are the preserver, originator and witness to civilization. The represented women writers of Arunachal Pradesh through their writing preserve and carry forward the myth and folklore of their tribe. Such myths and folklore would have been lost if they were not documented or portrayed by these writers in their mother tongue or in translation. Most of these writers now write in English to convey their stories to the world while others have their work translated into English. An argument can be raised whether rites and rituals, language and culture of local tribes can indeed be translated in their culture specific form into another language. Mamang Dai states the problem of translation in the English or Hindi language where the tribes are speaking less and less in their mother tongue and many such local languages are getting lost.

Mamang Dai’s volume offers a critique of the everyday life (the idea brought forward by Henri Lefebvre in his book ‘Critique of Everyday Life’) of sameness and equality which the bigger nation had promised the people of the North East. This volume confronts the complacency of the pre-Covid world which had thought the Indian people to be a homogenised lot complacent with the linguistic imposition of the state or national language. The Covid lockdown brought these intellectuals together who participated in this translation workshop to translate the various literary pieces of this area.

Whatever is the medium, language or genre of writing, the women writers have put a great effort in revival and representation of the myth and folklore in the literature of this region. Yater Nyokir in his essay “Bards from the Dawn-lit Mountains” introduces us to the literature of Arunachal Pradesh – “When we talk about the literature of Arunachal Pradesh we mean both the oral and the written. Oral literature is a manifestation of folklore and comprises sayings, anecdotes and stories of the origin myths as well as stories of animals and the universe, and of human beliefs and customs. Written literature includes works of fiction, poetry, drama, short stories, in creative interaction with oral literatures. There is an organic relationship between oral and written literature.” (Dai 158-159) The women writers namely Samy Moyong, Mishimbu Miri, Ayinam Ering, Rinchin Choden, Nellie N. Manpoong, Ponun Ering Angu, Ronnie Nido, Stuti, Mamen Lowang, Gyati T. M. Ampy, Ngurang Reena, Kolpi Dai, Tongam Rina, Bhanu Tatak, Leki Thungon, Rebom Belo, Toko Anu, Jamuna Bini, Tolum

Chumchum, Chasoom Bosai, Subi Taba, Nomi Maga Gumro, Subi Taba, Nomi Maga Gumro, Karry Padu, Doirangsi Kri, Yaniem Chukhu, Omili Borang, Millo Anka, Tunung Tabing, Ponung Ering Angu, Ing Perme, Subi Taba, Yater Nyokir and Mamang Dai generally manifest the following characteristics in their writing –

1. All of the above writers in spite of writing in the twenty first century are conscious of their cultural and ethnic background which finds expression in their writings.
2. They carry forward the folklore, myths, stories, sentiments of their specific tribe in their written works.
3. They have contributed to every genre of literature whether it is poetry, essay, anecdotes, nature conscious writing, lullaby or visual art.
4. They have perfectly blended modernist culture with their local culture and in some places there is a lamentation for the lost past of their forefathers.
5. They are conscious that they are conveying in a secondary language the stories of their tribal culture.

Women writers from Arunachal Pradesh have contributed a lot to the folklore of the North East.

The strategic location of Arunachal Pradesh in the North East of India and comprising the longest international border sharing with China, Tibet and Myanmar makes itself a challenging text. This state which houses several tribes within itself is an amalgamation of several other texts. But the task is never easy to find a single narrative voice to frame the narrative voice which will capture all the other voices. Arunachal Pradesh was a state which was important to the Britishers from the colonial times. This state can be understood from the anthropological point of view due to the several tribes living there sharing different religious views from the Tibetan Buddhism to the Christianity brought by the missionaries.

There is a dichotomy between the missionaries and the tribal people as the former is often accused of converting the local people to their faith. This has increased during the covid times as faith healing is taken as recourse by the church authorities to bring indigenous people to their side while the government tries to practise no tolerance towards this approach. An official notification dated February 28th, 2023 said that “This has been brought to the notice of undersigned that various organisations/groups are conducting Prayer Healing, Healing Crusades, Healing through local priest (Epak) etc. or (by whatsoever name called) are a remedy to cure various diseases and illness. Such practices are misleading the innocent people

from taking course to scientific medical treatment and cause severe health issues. It also gives rise to socio-cultural problems like conversion to other faith and thereby spreads discord among people and groups". (Organiser: Voice of the nation, <http://organiser.org>) This dichotomy between science and faith is a way of life for these people. Several women from the older generations carry traditional knowledge which is beyond the logic of science.

Such traditional knowledge and their carriers are put in pen and paper by the women writers. This state is also represented by the women writers as compiled and edited by the celebrated poet Mamang Dai who in her book *The Inheritance of Words* show how the feminist voices can be relocated in every genre of literature. Speaking of the importance of the state from the defence point of view, the Indian army has made the state a haven for tourism. Even Indian army has made a compromise between Buddhist beliefs and military folklore when they come in contact with the local people. Women writers from Arunachal Pradesh play a great role in reviving the folklore of the region. The place has no dearth of poems, folktales, short stories, nursery rhymes, epic narratives, shamanism and lullabies to name a few. Translation is also an important factor in reviving the ancient folktales and folk culture of this particular place.

In this paper I will mainly discuss the women writers from Arunachal Pradesh who have written in the book *The Inheritance of Words* and found a way to represent their culture specific feelings which are also universal at the same time. We find that folkloristics or the study of the folk or the common or indigenous tribes are central to the study of understanding the roots of a state. Arunachal Pradesh is a home for several tribes who have no written language for a longest period of time due to the focus of the people on satisfying their basic instincts like shelter and food which is very convincing. The study and narrative of the folk people helps to write a narrative which is separate from the grand narrative of the larger Indian nation.

We find that women occupy relatively less importance in the hierarchy of recording and documentation of folklore study where men's voice and witness are placed in a privileged position. Jordan, Rosan A. and F. A. de Caro notes in the North Indian society mother-daughter relationship are placed in a higher position –

“One study focuses upon how mother-daughter relationships are depicted in songs, wherein severely negative attitudes toward women and the birth of female children are seen as creating a strong bond between mother and female child, with the parent providing protection and guidance (in contrast to the customarily harsh treatment the daughter will receive from the family of her husband when she marries and moves into that household).”

Mamang Dai visualises the status of the absence of scripts and prevalence of orality among the tribes of the Arunachal Pradesh. This is one of the many reasons why folk culture is mainly represented through oral methods and performance which needs to be properly documented by scholars. In the Introduction to her book she presents one of many such stories –

“Imagine a group of people huddled around a fire. They are shuddering with cold and hunger. One of them unrolls a piece of rawhide. In the fireglow they see lines and scribbles. The wind is howling outside. Perhaps they are sheltering in a cave. The flames lick at the strange animal skin. It crackles and burns, giving off a delicious aroma. A man with a knife cuts it up into strips. They eat it and continue on their way.” (Mamand Dai 1)

In the absence of scripts, ritual practices find a written expression in the women writers who confides in this book and details from the private sphere are shared. Mishimbu Miri in her essay gives a glimpse of the secret beliefs and rituals of her tribe. “Revelations from Idu Mishmi Hymns” portrays the belief and practice of shamanism of the Idu Mishmi Shamans of which she had first hand experience as she was born into this. This reminds us of the many such Afro-American or African culture of the belief in Voodoo practices where both the spirits of nature and dead people are invoked. She gives a portrayal of the sacred place Athupopu of the Idu Mishmi community as it is found in the sacred hymns. She mentions the story of the great Igu figure Sinewru whose story gives an insight into the death ceremony of the Idus and how death is inevitable for everyone including the great Idu leader. Such a folkloric story bears religious allegory, beast fable, moral tale and religious rites.

The woman and mother also find an important mention in the folktales of Arunachal Pradesh.<sup>2</sup> The folktales are found in the book names ‘Myths of the North-East frontier of India’ written by the famous anthropologist Dr. Verrier Elwin and published in 1958. It states about the creation of the universe. The Apa Tani tribe believes that they originated from the figure of a woman named Kujum Chantu who symbolised the earth. The Apa Tanis lived on her belly and she destroyed herself out of concern that if she got on her feet, the human beings who she has nurtured would fall off. The whole North Eastern topography originated from her transformed body. Assam plains which has fertile soil originated from her buttocks, her eyes became the sun and the moon. Due to transformation of her mouth, Kujum-popi was born who made the Sun and the Moon. This wonderful tale of metamorphosis gives enormous importance to the sacredness of the ritual of birth.

The folktale of the Dhammai or Miji tribe speaks about the creation of the earth and the sky due to several cycle of procreation. Shuzanghu and the wife procreated and gave birth to a girl, Subbu Khai-Thung who stood for the earth and a boy Jongsuli-Young-Jongbu who is the

sky. But as there was no solid surface like earth to hold them, they fell from a height and was swallowed by Phanglomang the Worm. Later Shuzanghu corrected his mistake and made a solid surface where their third born child could rest and a trap was set where it could be given shelter. The worm came to devour the child but it was caught in the trap. The Worm was cut open to find the girl and boy playing inside. This folktale also stresses the role of mothers and the sacredness of birth. In this folktale we find there is a seamless transition from the natural world to the human world and animal world. Earth, sky, mountains, frogs, worms, human beings live in a symbiotic world as they smoothly transform into one another. There is a deep sense of ecology and environmental friendly message delivered to us.

The Hrusso tribe attributes the origin of the earth and the sky as two eggs and imagines the story of creation in the form of a conjugal love. The eggs came nearer to each other, collided and broke open to form the earth and the sky. The sky as the husband requested the earth wife to become smaller so that she could be embraced. She did so and from their relationship, both the natural world and the human world came into existence.

The Singpho tribe understands the origin of creation from the natural elements of cloud and mist which is common to the ecological environment they live in. Cloud and mist gave rise to a woman named Khupning-Kuam who was a kind of cloud. She gave birth to a girl named Ningon-Chinun and a boy called Tung-Kam-Waisun. This boy and girl looked like snow. They grew up and married each other and then a girl named Inga (representation of Earth) and a son called Mu (representation of sky) were born. Inga was the shape of mud and Mu was a cloud. They also married and gave birth to Imbung, the wind. This wind blew so wildly that he raised his father into the sky and dried his mother. Thus heaven and earth were formed.

The connection of women to the field and plantation is suggested by the Tah Thavan festival in Loding, Arunachal Pradesh which is a woman only festival which celebrates the puberty of the girls as they get ready for marriage. Alongside this celebration of womanhood, the women of the village gather to pray for the fertility of mother earth for a better harvest every year. They generally perform or jhum kheti or shifting cultivation and farm on a particular piece of land and keep it fallow for about nine years. The number nine is specifically connected to the year of puberty of a girl. This ritual is especially found among the Wancho and Nocte tribe. The women of the village celebrate this special occasion by wearing their traditional dress and jewellery. They mainly feed on farm animals and wine and men are not allowed to participate in this festival which is privy to the world of women.

‘My Ane’s Tribal Love Affair’ by Ngurang Reena identifies the discriminations and injustices towards women found in her tribe. As she lost her husband, the bereaved wife sacrifices many

animals to appease the spirits. She curses her god Donyi Polo. The Nyibus are the priests who carries the power to announce the oracle. This poem shows how the tribal people have amalgamated their tribal beliefs with western concepts. Her husband was buried with candles and a Bible. His funeral was blessed by both the Nyibus and the priest of the church. The poet's mother was sold like a property to her husband in exchange for a few mithuns. Her mother's friends Yalam and Yapi went to school at thirteen while she was getting married. There is a sustained irony in the lines –

“Two of her sisters Nyaku and Yami had the same fate,

Sold to older men in the village.

The inseparable transaction; a sacred contract.

Blessed by spirits of the forest, their forefathers, their ancient tradition.” (Dai 45)

But some few years later her husband remarried which the poet calls “A Betrayal in the transaction, a betrayal in tradition...” (Dai 45)

But above everything, the poet declares is the bond between the mother and the child –

“But mother never leave!

An umbilical cord never severs

Their imprint on their children is stronger than the belief in gods.” (Dai 45)

The poet wish her mother could remarry but their tradition and culture does not allow a widow to remarry. The following lines bind the women of the old with the new generation –

“Yet I will carry folklore, magic, the spirits of Nyapin with me.

I will revere my prayers and my traditions.

I am carrying my tribe on my back,

Knowing that we will always be one in this today,

Tomorrow and in death.” (Dai 48)

Tongam Rina in her beautiful piece of writing “The Interpreter of Dreams” reminisces about her grandmother. Such tribal women have access to extra-sensory knowledge about weather and about the climate and vegetation she resides in. She was the interpreter of dreams and had the capacity to foretell the death of anyone. She proudly declares about her grandmother – “My first feminist, who believed in a world that’s equal and fair for all.” Leki Thungon in her story ‘Doused Flames’ shows how the matrilineal side is often neglected or not remembered in favour of the patrilineal side. Even such tribal history favours the male members of the family who are identified as the carrier of progeny.

There is an ecofeminist consciousness in the writings of some of the women writers. The District Gazette of Arunachal Pradesh express the scenic beauty of the state in the following words –

“The scenic beauties of the Lohit district are splendid. The snowy mountains along the international border, the lower hills decked with dense evergreen forests and innumerable rivers and rivulets cascading down from the rocky heights and rippling through the green expanse of the valleys constitute a panorama, which is at once magnificent and awe-inspiring.” (Dutta Choudhury 4)

Ayinam Ering’s poem ‘I Am a Tree’ portrays the consciousness of a tree and its importance to every generation. Rinchin Choden in her visual representation compares the wooden mask worn in traditional masks and the gas masks which will replace the former due to cutting of trees. Gyati T.M. Ampy in her poem ‘The Wooden House’ reminisces about the rustic house with ‘Whispered old tales’. Tongam Rina remembers her grandmother who lived in perfect harmony with nature in her piece ‘The Interpreter of Dreams’. Her grandmother had the special ability to interpret dreams along with songs of birds and cries of animals, foretell death and predict weather. She taught the author how to live in sync with nature but the author regrets that she was not a good student. Jamuna Bini in her poem ‘Those Idle Days’ feels nostalgic about the house in her village –

“In this bamboo house

When the fourteen hearths

Blaze in tune

The floating flames swim through the bamboo cracks

And brighten up the world outside.” (Dai 87)

Subi Taba in 'The Spirit of the Forest' shows how animal spirits haunt poachers who come in search of profit and engage in deforestation and killing of Animals. The author speaks of an incident which he thinks will become an urban legend or story handed down from generation after generation. A rich minister whom she calls Mr.Fraudulent misappropriated the government money for the development of the village and forest area in building a palatial home and in bribing the officials. His greed grew day by day and he spread fire to further his process of deforestation. Then nature intervened and sent lightning and rain to douse the fire and that minister was killed accidentally by lightning in his terrace. The belief of the villagers in the sanctity of the forest spread the story that "a female spirit living in the forest got enraged and burnt him down for destroying the forest. While some hypothesized that all the dead spirits of the forest animals and birds raced towards him to avenge their death and charred him to death along with them." (Dai 101) The spirit of the forest rose triumphant at the end.

Dan Ben-Amos in his article "Toward a Definition of Folklore in Context" defines folklore as art, knowledge or thought of a specific ethnic culture which has potential to cross over language, area, geographical boundaries or time and the same story might have different versions over area or time. Folklore also serves as a way of defamiliarising cultural truths. Community of people have been born into and lived with the myths and legends but have somehow lost touch with their inner spirit. Folklore serves as a bridge among these people to connect with their familiar culture. The contributions of the above discussed women writers to the area of folklore have the same potential to transcend the boundaries of time, place or group. The study of folklore as exhibited in the women writers of Arunachal Pradesh unifies myths, legends, poems, pictures, lullabies, essays of a specific culture which stands not at the centre but at the periphery of our country but nonetheless very important to the growth of literature. The work of these women writers not only adds to the area of folkloric studies but also to feminist, ecofeminist and ecocritical literature which needs to be explored further.

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**End Notes:**

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2. <https://pasighat.wordpress.com/2011/05/23/four-folktales-from-arunachal-pradesh>

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