

IMAGES OF WOMEN IN MAMANG DAI'S FICTION

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Mamang Dai is a well-known figure in literature from Northeast, India. She has to her credit a book of poetry called *River Poems* and other works of fiction like *The Legends of Pensam*, *Arunachal Pradesh: The Hidden Land* and *Stupid Cupid*. Mamang Dai's poetry and prose are mostly about Arunachal Pradesh, her birth place. While most other writers from Northeastⁱ write about the distinctive problems of Northeast like the insurgency movements, marginalization of the Northeastern states of India, the struggle of the region to seek separation and sovereignty from the centre, etc., Mamang Dai's writings are neo-romantic in nature and she often projects Northeast as an exotic land, different from the rest of India. It is also interesting to note that in the few works of fiction that she has written, she has penned down varied and interesting images of tribal women of Northeast and voiced out the unique problems of these women. By the phrase "tribal women of Northeast", I specifically refer to the women of hill-dwelling communities of Northeast India, with roots in Southeast Asia. This paper is thereby, an attempt to read the varied images of women in Mamang Dai's fiction like *Stupid Cupid* and *The Legends of Pensam*.

The Legends of Pensam, which appeared in 2006, is a collection of connected stories where Dai tells us about the hard life in the hills of a remote state of the North East, Arunachal Pradesh. On the other hand, *Stupid Cupid* is a novel which appeared in the year 2009. It deals with the attempt of the protagonist, Adna and other women characters like Mareb and Jia who leave their native places to achieve freedom and independence in the city of Delhi. Mamang Dai's women characters fluctuates from conventional kinds of women, who are steeped in tradition to women who struggle to come to terms with modernity. A careful reading of Mamang Dai's fiction allows us to look at two contrasting images of women: village women and city women. City women are assertive, elegant and sophisticated whereas village women are innocent, submissive, simple, crude and hard working like everyone else in it. Driven by poverty and lack of opportunity, village women work very hard to make a living and to maintain their families. In "The words of women" in *The Legends of Pensam*, Mamang Dai describes a group of village women,

They have been in the forest all morning, cutting wood, cracking dry bamboo and piling stray branches seasoned by sun and rain to be carried back to the village. This is a daily necessity. (Dai 2006, 73)

In the tribal villages of Northeast, men and women have their own allotted space, which coincides with its responsibilities. It is seen that in the socio-economic set up of most tribal communities of Northeast, women have a more dominant role to play than men and their status is much higher than women in other parts of the country. Women spend time in the kitchen preparing food and carry out tasks like cleaning and washing clothes, utensils, looking after infants and children, weaving, etc. but also do other jobs which normally men do like cutting wood, collecting roots and vegetables and cultivating. Thus, apparently it seems that the conventional equation of male/public and female/private does not hold

true in the case of tribal communities of Northeast. But it can also be argued that these roles that women play in these communities only give them a false sense of participation. Structures of inequality are still in place in those communities and women are not allowed equal access to the public spheres. Women's participation in the public space cannot avail them opportunities for their own personal development; rather it is for the well-being of their families. Women are encouraged to see that their proper sphere is the private domestic sphere and thus this also lead to a pressure on their mobility within the public sphere. Women can be tolerated in the public sphere only if they have also proved themselves in the private sphere as a good wife or mother.

One factor that is vital to the novels of Mamang Dai is that they show the organization and gendering of space or spheres, and the apparent tension between individualism and relationality. Some women are shown to adhere more to their relational self and seem to draw their sense of meaning and happiness from association with others, from being part of, rather than apart from, a collective entity. These women adhere to the gender roles prescribed by society and occupy only those spaces. For instance, in *Stupid Cupid*, Mareb's mother sacrifices her wishes and likings in her attempt to be the perfect housewife. Mareb recalls how her mother looked after the house "obeying the instructions of her father". (Dai 2009, 37) The omniscient narrator of the novel, Adna describes how Mareb remembers her mother:

Mareb had never seen her mother reading nor heard her even once mention a book or an author's name before. Perhaps she had hidden her heart All Mareb remembered of her was her putting up curtains, sewing lace on to the borders of tablecloths and providing some semblance of grace and good living in a life that was constantly on the move ... (Dai 2009, 37)

Thus, we can say that women in these communities are still imprisoned by the internal structures of their communities; while they also do a lot of physical moving outside the protected environment of home, they are still at the receiving end. Moreover, these societies are not matriarchal societies and women are still pushed to the margins. Limitation is placed on women's access to knowledge and it is men who are the decision makers in both public and private affairs, in most of the tribal communities of Northeast. Veeranki Maheswara Rao, in her study *Tribal Women of Arunachal Pradesh* found out that women, though considered important in society, were not involved in decision making process in most communities of Arunachal Pradesh. She writes,

... decisions related to major issues are taken by husbands ... Men dominated in making decisions on number of children to bear, arranging children's marriage, taking/giving loans, sale/purchase of animals, settlement of disputes, social visits, and to some extent voting. (Rao 2003, 128)

In *The Legends of Pensam*, Mamang Dai presents to her readers the culture, values and belief systems of the Adis, one of the major tribes of Arunachal Pradesh. Hoxo, a major character in the story, tells Mona, a proprietor of a glossy magazine who visits the hills of Arunachal Pradesh in order to collect stories for her magazine, the story of a widow, Omum: how the village people turned a blind eye to her post-widowhood dilemmas. Hoxo also reveals that in most tribal societies women are held responsible for any kind of misfortune that befalls on the family or house. Hoxo tells the story of another widow called Pinyar, who is abandoned by her husband. But, instead of availing justice to her, Pinyar is blamed for her misfortune. She is forced to marry another man called Lekon, who also unfortunately gets killed in a hunting accident. Later, her house catches fire and even then, she is the one who is blamed and banished from the village by the decision makers of the village, to the outskirts of the village. In such a society, the marginalised women remain voiceless without any agency. Pinyar expresses her plight in the words, "It seems my destiny is cursed." (Dai 2009, 28) Thus, most women in villages have to blame their destinies

for the hardships they undergo. The multiple identities of a woman, that is, her individual identity as a woman and her group identity as a member of the family and community place her between the dilemma of individual and community interest. The condition of women is even worse during times of conflict and violence between the Centre and the State or among the different tribes of Northeast. Northeastern women face the burnt of conflicts between the Centre and the state and the atrocities of militarization. Women during such movements become vulnerable and women's bodies become sites of various complexities subjected to male gaze, physical violence, and sexual politics.

However, Mamang Dai also represents another type of tribal Northeast women in her fiction: women who are more independent and do not like to follow the structure prescribed by society. Migration to the cities is an empowering factor for these women from Northeast as it is an escape for them from the patriarchal norms of the village, traditional familial expectations, a disturbed marriage, 'routine violence'ⁱⁱ on women as a result of militarism and unemployment, and so on. After the economic liberalisation, urbanisation took its course and people from Northeast started moving to the metro cities. Cities like Delhi, Hyderabad, Bangalore, Mumbai, etc. are favourable destinations for most Northeast women as education and work is possible in those spaces. These spaces also desire Northeast labour, particularly in shopping malls, call centres, and hospitality industry. These cities are perceived or imagined by Northeasterners as places very different from their own home towns and villages which is "predatory and caste-ridden as opposed to collective and egalitarian." (Mcduie-ra 2012, 19) The protagonist in Mamang Dai's novel, *Stupid Cupid* is also such a woman called Adna, who leaves her home town Itanagar and settles in New Delhi, a city over 2000kms away from the Northeast after doing a hotel management course in Guwahati and Calcutta. She inherits a piece of property: a four cornered house in South Delhi, and transforms it into a guest house or a love nest for couples and singles to come together "for an afternoon, a day and sometimes for months." Adna has liberal views of life and she loves the liberal ways of Delhi. While the elders of the village warned youngsters like her about the cruelty of Delhi, and advised them to get married and settle down in the locality, Adna says that she liked everything about Delhi. She says,

... this anonymity was the very thing I liked. After the watchful expectations of a small town, being a total stranger among strangers was a relief and a pleasure... I like the heavy evenings, filled with diesel fumes and smoke, and the heat burning our faces ... dusty trees in full bloom...Coming out of restaurants we would stand under the trees and puff at our cigarettes. It was all very different from where I came. (Dai 2009, 14)

Adna reveals herself to be a diehard romantic and Delhi becomes the city of her dreams. She believes that she has found love, freedom, and independence in Delhi. But does migration to the cities really allow Northeastern women to completely defy patriarchy and their marginalised status, or do they face newer forms of oppression there? Migration also brings about questions on identity and citizenship of Northeast women.

It has to be acknowledged that women's experiences are varied as well as the patriarchal oppression that they face. An emphasis on 'difference' would shatter all illusions of homogeneity in the experiences of women. Women are not only oppressed by men within patriarchal relationships, but there are also other areas of oppression in their lives which they experience in a gendered way. Mamang Dai's fiction aids a comprehensive understanding of Northeastern women's experience of migration. Mamang Dai highlights that there is a huge gap between the migrant woman's aspirations and expectations from the city and the resulting reality.

Both Adna and Mareb in *Stupid Cupid* are disillusioned in love. But when Adna and Mareb first came to Delhi, they were both starry-eyed about the place. They both fall in love with non-tribal men from Delhi. They are both projected by Mamang Dai as liberal women, with modern views of life, who believe that religion, caste and cultural differences do not matter in love. Both Adna and Mareb break the traditional beliefs of their native places that do not encourage cross-cultural marriages. In most communities in Northeast, there is the practice of marrying within a specific ethnic group, class, or social group, rejecting others on such basis of being unsuitable for marriage. People who marry outside their own communities are either disowned or looked down with contempt.ⁱⁱⁱ Adna mentions about her own aunt who married a man outside her community and was never talked about in the family thereafter as it was believed that she has brought shame to the family. Adna, like her aunt, wants to marry someone she loves, regardless of the community the person belongs to. Mareb, on the other hand did not want to live the kind of life her mother led, restricting herself to the four walls of her home. But, in spite of her liberal views, she finds herself trapped and gradually molded by the traditional ways of thinking and she agrees to marry a man of her father's choice. But she is later enticed and encouraged by her ex-lover, Rohit to fall in love with him again and start an affair with him. But the men they love are only interested in having a secret affair with them. Adna's lover, who is already married, never thinks of taking the relationship to the next level. It is hinted that the man ultimately deserts her although the reasons are unclear. The case of Adna is similar with many other women from Northeast who are deceived in love as they are not accepted because of their race.

It is a well-known fact that racism defines the Northeast migrant experience of cities like Delhi. The consequence of racism for women of Northeast in Delhi is adverse. Northeast migrants are seen as racially different from the Indian mainstream and marked down as 'others'. While many other communities of India may also be discriminated in several places in India on the basis of religion, caste and ethnicity, yet the nationality and origin of these communities are not questioned, at every turn. They can merge in to the heartland in ways that Northeast migrants cannot. In *Stupid Cupid*, Mamang Dai represents some of the daily experiences of discrimination that Northeast people face in Delhi based on their race. When Adna's cousin, Jia and her friend, TD try to hire a cab for themselves, a rude woman dumps herself in the back seat and refuses to give up the cab. To add to their fury, the woman also makes a very racist remark, "Hey you! Jao! Jao! Go back to your own ... Desh!" (Dai 2009, 52), thereby questioning their nationality and citizenship.

Zaheer Baber (2010) points out that the question of racism within the country are supposedly marginalized in mainstream debates because as in India racism has come to mean something 'white people do to India', deflecting attention away from racism towards minorities and foreigners. Duncan Mcduie-ra in his study, *Northeast Migrants in Delhi: Race, Refuge and Retail*, analyses how for Northeast migrants physical appearance is central in interactions with members of other communities. He says,

Physical features denoting Tai, Tibeto-Burman, and Mon-Khmer lineages mark Northeasterners as separate from the Indian mainstream, even when accounting for the diversity of that mainstream. Infact, these features routinely lead to questioning of nationality and citizenship. Through their physical appearance, Northeast migrants are not only viewed as others, but their otherness is also associated with the ways the Northeast frontier is understood and misunderstood socially and politically in the Indian mainstream. (Mcduie-ra 2012, 87)

Northeasterners are given the derogatory term of 'chinky' and their citizenship is doubted and mistaken for a Nepali, Chinese, Japanese, etc. Appearance of the Northeast migrants invokes

stereotypes about Northeasterners which leads to certain prejudices resulting in discrimination, harassment and violence. Very often they are thought of as “immoral and sexually promiscuous, a backward subject from the misty jungle, an anti-national rebel, a Chinese national, and a privileged elite benefitting from Government reservations.” (Mcduie-ra 2012, 87)

Adna’s experience with her boyfriend from Delhi can be related to these deeply embedded stereotypes about Northeast women. Northeastern women, especially tribal northeastern women, are considered loose and immoral. While most tribal women from Northeast carry their sense of freedom and independence from their native places, they are mostly misunderstood by others as they do not confine themselves to the so called “respectable public sites” and mostly occupy the sexualised spaces of the city – hotels, bars, streets, etc. According to Duncan Mcduie-ra, “... their subjectivity is not coterminous with the subjectivity of Indian women more generally who are constructed as mothers and daughters through almost universal marriage and the ubiquitous portrayal of the housewife and mother in the media, public policy and national symbolism.” (Mcduie-ra 2003, 96) Northeastern women are distinguished from the mainstream Indian women who are considered the mothers and daughters of the country and are more immune to be cast as sexual objects than the mainstream Indian women. The Indian mainstream males sexualize Northeast women, devaluing and dehumanizing them as women who give away or sell sexual intercourse and they are seen as ideal gratifiers of mainstream Indian male. Both Adna’s and Mareb’s boyfriend Rohit can be accused of instilling false dreams and hopes in them and leading them nowhere. While Adna’s boyfriend leaves the country for Canada without giving a reasonable explanation, Mareb’s boyfriend continues to encourage Mareb to keep an illicit relationship her, inspite of her being a wife and a mother. However, a mainstream Indian male may not have the same opinion about the typical Indian women folk. Having observed Mareb’s relationship with Rohit, Adna asks her boyfriend if his wife could also be having some relations with other men. But he strongly believed that she could never do such a thing. His discrimination between Mareb and his own wife also reflects his prejudices against Northeast women as loose and immoral.

Thus, through these women characters Mamang Dai voices out the unique experiences of Northeastern women, who are discriminated, exploited and treated as foreigners in their own country. The characters develop a gradual understanding of the racial and sexual politics that determine the experiences of Northeastern women in both villages and cities. However, it is only after Adna’s dear friend, Amine is killed by burglars that Adna gets a closer experience of violence and death that lurks in the city and realizes that the glitz and glamour of the city is only an illusion.

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End Notes:

ⁱ Writers from the Northeast like Robin Ngangom, Desmond Kharmawplang, Kynpham Sing Nongkynrih write on themes like terrorism, insurgency problems, conflict between the centre and the states, etc.

ⁱⁱ Historian, Gyanendra Pandey uses this term in his book, *Routine Violence: Nations, Fragments, Histories* (2006) to discuss the different types of violence prevalent in 20th century, India. He argues that violence is key in the production and reproduction of majorities and minorities which he calls “routine violence”.

ⁱⁱⁱ See T. Raatan’s *History, Religion and Culture of Northeast India* (2006) and Bimal. J. Deb (ed) *Ethnic Issues, Secularism and Conflict Resolution in Northeast India* (2006).