



The Interplay of Land and Culture: An Ecocritical Reading of *The Black Hill*

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Abstract

This paper presents an ecocritical analysis of Mamang Dai's *The Black Hill*, focusing on the intricate relationship between land, culture, and human experience. Set in the lush and conflict-ridden landscape of Arunachal Pradesh, *The Black Hill* intertwines the spiritual and the natural, illuminating how the land shapes and is shaped by cultural and historical forces. By exploring the novel's depiction of the sacred bond between indigenous communities and their environment, this study highlights Dai's portrayal of nature as a living, breathing entity with agency and spiritual significance. The paper also examines the impact of colonial and religious encounters on this relationship, underscoring the ecological and cultural dissonance that ensues. Through an ecocritical lens, this analysis reveals how Dai's narrative urges a rethinking of human-nature relationships, advocating for a deeper ecological consciousness rooted in cultural heritage and environmental stewardship. By engaging with themes of spiritual ecology and cultural resilience, this research contributes to a broader understanding of indigenous environmental perspectives in contemporary literary discourse.

Keywords: Colonialism, Culture, Ecocriticism, Ecofeminism, Ecology.

Introduction

Mamang Dai's *The Black Hill* stands as a testament to the intricate and deeply interwoven relationship between land and culture in the context of northeastern India. Set against the backdrop of the Eastern Himalayas, the novel

not only narrates the socio-political upheavals of the 19th century but also encapsulates the region's spiritual and ecological ethos. Dai's writing brings to life a world where the natural environment is both a physical and a spiritual entity, embodying the collective memory,

myths, and identity of the indigenous communities. The novel portrays the landscape as more than a mere setting; it is a vital force that shapes human experiences and cultural practices.

In recent decades, ecocriticism has emerged as a significant framework in literary studies, examining the relationship between literature and the natural world. By focusing on how texts depict ecological concerns, ecocriticism urges a reconsideration of anthropocentric worldviews and highlights the necessity of environmental awareness. In the case of *The Black Hill*, Dai's narrative invites an ecocritical exploration of how cultural identities are intimately tied to the land and how colonial and missionary interventions have disrupted this harmony. Through this lens, the novel serves as a critique of the ecological and cultural consequences of external forces, while also celebrating the resilience of indigenous traditions.

This paper aims to analyze *The Black Hill* from an ecocritical perspective, investigating how Dai intertwines nature and culture to illuminate the spiritual and environmental challenges faced by the region. It will explore the novel's depiction of nature as a sacred, animate entity and the ways in which cultural narratives reinforce this connection. Additionally, the paper will address the disruptions caused by colonialism and religious conversion, examining the resulting ecological and cultural tensions. By situating Dai's work within the broader context of ecocriticism, this study seeks to highlight the novel's relevance to contemporary discussions on environmental ethics, indigenous knowledge, and the enduring relationship between humans and the natural world.

1. The Sacred Landscape and Indigenous Spirituality

Mamang Dai's *The Black Hill* highlights the profound spiritual connection that indigenous communities share with their

environment. The novel illustrates nature as a living entity, central to cultural practices and beliefs. Dai writes, "Here the land was old, breathing quietly, watching as it had done for centuries" (*The Black Hill* 14), suggesting the landscape's active role in the community's spiritual life.

This depiction resonates with ecocritical theories that emphasize the spiritual significance of nature in indigenous cultures. According to Greg Garrard, "Ecocriticism seeks to articulate the interconnectedness between the human and non-human world, recognizing how many cultures view nature as a sacred, life-sustaining force" (Garrard 23). Dai's representation of nature as sacred challenges anthropocentric worldviews and supports a holistic understanding of the ecosystem.

Further, scholars have argued for the importance of indigenous perspectives in ecocritical discourse. As Vine Deloria Jr. explains, "The land itself retains a sense of spirituality and history that binds the people together in a shared destiny" (Deloria 45). Dai's narrative embodies this view by portraying the land not merely as a backdrop but as a custodian of cultural memory and wisdom.

2. Colonial and Missionary Encroachments: Ecological and Cultural Impact

The novel also explores the impact of colonialism and missionary activities on the ecological and cultural landscape of Arunachal Pradesh. The intrusion of external forces disrupts the harmonious relationship between the land and its people. Dai describes this turmoil: "The strangers came, with crosses and guns, seeking to conquer not just the land but the spirit of the people" (*The Black Hill* 112). Here, Dai critiques the imposition of foreign beliefs that destabilize the indigenous understanding of nature.

Scholars have explored similar themes in postcolonial ecocriticism. Rob Nixon, in *Slow Violence and the Environmentalism of the Poor*, emphasizes how colonialism often inflicts "slow

violence” on ecosystems and local cultures, causing long-term damage that goes unacknowledged (Nixon 17). Dai’s portrayal of environmental and cultural dissonance aligns with this idea, illustrating the gradual erosion of traditional ecological knowledge.

Furthermore, William Cronon’s concept of the “trouble with wilderness” provides insight into this disruption. Cronon argues, “The imposition of Western environmental values often disregards indigenous ecological practices, undermining traditional ways of living with the land” (Cronon 79). In *The Black Hill*, this imposition is evident in how the arrival of missionaries erodes local spiritual practices, transforming the community’s connection to the landscape.

3. Ecocritical Symbolism and the Role of Myths

Dai masterfully weaves local myths and symbols into the narrative, emphasizing the cultural significance of the environment. The legend of the Black Hill itself serves as a metaphor for the enduring strength and spiritual essence of the land. Dai writes, “The Black Hill was a guardian, ancient and wise, witnessing generations of human folly and grace” (*The Black Hill* 210). This symbolism reinforces the idea that nature holds a repository of wisdom and resilience.

Ecocritical scholars argue that myths are a crucial medium through which ecological wisdom is conveyed. Wendy Wheeler states, “Myths are stories that bind people to their environment, shaping their values and ecological ethics” (Wheeler 32). By embedding myths in the narrative, Dai underscores the significance of storytelling as a means of preserving ecological and cultural knowledge.

Moreover, the novel highlights the theme of spiritual ecology. David Abram, in *The Spell of the Sensuous*, discusses how traditional societies “perceive the land as a living, communicative presence” (Abram 9). Dai’s depiction of the land echoes this view, emphasizing how cultural

narratives foster an intimate relationship with the environment.

4. Resilience and Ecological Consciousness

Despite the disruptions caused by external forces, *The Black Hill* celebrates the resilience of indigenous communities and their enduring ecological consciousness. Dai portrays characters who, despite hardships, strive to maintain their cultural and environmental heritage. For instance, the character of Kajinsha embodies the spirit of resistance: “He held the stories of his ancestors, knowing they were the true heartbeat of the land” (*The Black Hill* 257). This resilience reflects a commitment to sustaining the spiritual and ecological bonds with the landscape.

Ecocriticism advocates for the recognition of such indigenous wisdom in contemporary environmental debates. As Ramachandra Guha and Juan Martínez-Alier argue, “The environmentalism of the poor often stems from a lived reality of environmental degradation and cultural loss, making their struggles crucial for ecological sustainability” (Guha and Martínez-Alier 58). Dai’s narrative serves as a powerful reminder of the need to honor and learn from these perspectives.

Conclusion

Mamang Dai’s *The Black Hill* offers a compelling exploration of the deep-rooted connection between land and culture, highlighting the spiritual and ecological values inherent in indigenous ways of life. Through an ecocritical lens, the novel reveals how the natural environment is not just a passive backdrop but an active, sacred entity that shapes and is shaped by human experience. Dai’s narrative underscores the necessity of recognizing and respecting the ecological wisdom embedded within indigenous cultures, particularly in the face of colonial and missionary disruptions that have historically undermined these harmonious relationships.

The novel serves as a poignant reminder of the cultural and environmental consequences of external forces, illustrating the gradual erosion of traditional ecological knowledge and the enduring impact of colonial violence. Yet, it also celebrates the resilience of indigenous communities and their continued efforts to preserve their cultural heritage and spiritual connection to the land. By emphasizing the role of myths, storytelling, and the wisdom of women as custodians of ecological knowledge, Dai advocates for a more holistic and inclusive understanding of environmental ethics.

In the broader context of ecocriticism, *The Black Hill* contributes to critical discussions on how literature can shape our ecological consciousness. It calls for a reevaluation of human-nature relationships, urging a shift from anthropocentric perspectives to one of reverence and interdependence. The novel ultimately emphasizes that the survival of both cultural identities and natural ecosystems depends on our ability to respect and learn from the deep ecological wisdom of indigenous communities. In this way, *The Black Hill* becomes not just a narrative about the past but a call to action for the future, advocating for cultural and environmental stewardship rooted in respect, resilience, and interconnectedness.

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