Research Journal of English Language and Literature (RJELAL)
A Peer Reviewed (Refereed) International Journal
Impact Factor 6.8992 (ICI) http://www.rjelal.com;
Email:editorrjelal@gmail.com; ISSN:2395-2636 (P); 2321-3108(O)

Vol.14.Issue 1. 2026 (Jan-March)

RESEARCH ARTICLE

INTERNATIONAL STANDARD SERIAL NUMBER INDIA
2395-2636 (Print):2321-3108 (online)

Magic Realism embodied in Tribal Belief System and Environment of Arunachal Pradesh as Reflected in the Writings of Mamang Dai

Topi N. Bagra
Assistant Professor (G.L), Dera Natung Govt. College, Arunachal Pradesh
Email: topibagra01@gmail.com

DOI: 10.33329/rjelal.14.1.180

Article info
Article Received: 13/01/2026
Article Accepted: 11/02/2026
Published online: 16/02/2026

Abstract

Mamang Dai's writings emerge from the cultural and geographical landscape of Arunachal Pradesh, where tribal animistic belief systems and lived experiences of nature are inseparably intertwined. They are integral parts of not just our folktales, but most of our songs, prayers and idioms - all passed down through word of mouth. Most folk songs and chants are dedicated to the arrival of harvest season (which is usually the only festival celebrated among the tribes of Arunachal Pradesh), indicating how nature is seen as the god who provides all. Our local stories take place in forests, where the realm of the spirits and the human world are intertwined.

These are common themes reflected in Dai's writings which employ magic realism as a narrative mode to represent nature not merely as a physical environment but as a site of myth. Memory in Dai's writing is spatial rather than chronological, and her characters often remember stories through elements in nature - passing by a rock or a river along the way. This paper will explore how literature serves as a space for such stories, cultural memory and environmental reflection, offering a vision of human - nature relationships grounded in indigenous experience while highlighting how tribal narratives are important contributions to eco-criticism.

Keywords: Magic Realism, Environment and Culture, Eco-criticism, North-East Indian Literature, Mamang Dai.

Introduction

Magic realism is a branch of literature where in the supernatural, or one could say 'magic' co-exists with the human world. It blurs the line between the uncommon and everyday life - and the characters are not fazed by abnormal occurrences. So, when there is a flower shower from the sky in Gabriela Garcia Marquez's novel, or a sky husband descending to take his earthly wife in Easterine Kire's short story, it is treated as an experience that happened to a real person rather than a folk tale with a lesson for children.

The genre is usually associated with Latin American texts - emerging from societies shaped by colonialism and cultural hybridity. Both these elements can be used to describe literature emerging from Arunachal Pradesh - a state where oral tradition is the main source of passing down history, events and stories. Documentation first started during the colonial period, which is a more reliable source for history, but when it comes to cultural memory, the narratives preserved orally better reflect social values and collective memory.

A common critic of literature is that it works as a *mirror of society*, capturing its values, norms, and collective behavior in artistic form. When Britain was going through industrialisation, writers wrote about the transformation of villages to cities, the unhygienic streets and the smoke from the factories. The Japanese idiom, 'mono no aware' or 'the bittersweet poignancy of things' that emerged during the Heian period as a concept in traditional literary criticism is used to describe texts and haikus that use a lot of natural elements like the changing of seasons, fading of beauty and the passing of time.

Similarly, tribal communities living in forested landscapes, guided by experiential knowledge of their environment and animistic worldviews, produced literature that remains deeply intertwined with nature. Here, nature is understood as more than a physical landscape of, it is also a spiritual domain inhabited by unseen entities that may deceive hunters, draw wanderers into other realms, or spirit away children from nearby settlements.

Hence, the writings of Mamang Dai - particularly *The Legends of Pensam* and *The Black Hill* tell such stories wherein the culture of the state is shown authentically with all its tales of spirits and gods dwelling amongst humans, interacting with them and sometimes intruding. Consequently, the characters' actions and perceptions are guided by a profound trust in natural forces and in traditional belief systems that govern their relationship with the spiritual realm.

Discussion

The literature of Northeast India, particularly the oeuvre of Mamang Dai, necessitates a critical approach that transcends conventional Western binaries of the 'natural' versus the 'supernatural.' One could argue that European works could also fit into the genre of magic realism - take for example, Gregor Samsa waking up as a bug one day in *Metamorphosis* or Orlando turning into a woman mid-story in Virginia Woolf's novel. However, these storylines share close ties with absurdism and fantasy - we treat them as 'mystical' elements of the story that contribute to its message. The oddities are accepted as bizarre rather than something that happens on a usual day.

To analyze Dai's work is to engage with what Amaryll Chanady defines as the 'territorialization' of the supernatural—a hallmark of magic realism where the marvelous is integrated into the mundane reality of the characters without hesitation or explanation. In the landscape of Arunachal Pradesh, this literary mode is not a stylistic imposition but an 'authentic' reflection of a tribal animistic belief system. Quoting from the book *The Black Hill*:

> "She knew this from all the stories about her village that she had heard as a child, from the way a man could slip from a bridge, or a villager have his head twisted by an invisible attacker on the way to the fields, all preys to evil spirits who roamed these hills. (Dai 49)"

From an eco-critical perspective, Dai's narratives align with Cheryll Glotfelty's assertion that literature must explore the 'interconnections between the physical world and the human spirit'. However, Dai moves beyond mere environmental description, employing what may be termed "indigenous eco-criticism." Here, nature is viewed not as a

passive setting but as a "site of myth" and a spiritual agent.

There is an interconnectedness in the protagonists of *The Black Hill* that Dai sprinkles about using nature - they are all on a journey. Father Nicholas Krick is on his way to find a route to Tibet through the Abor hills. He travels through the same routes that Kajinsha and Gimur take to reach the Mishmee Hills. There is a contrast between how they view the landscape as well. For Krick, it is a tiring and cumbersome adventure - swinging from vines, wading through muddy waters in December, the constant weather changes. Whereas for the inhabitants of the land, Kajinsha and Gimur, they know about the stories and memories that the land holds. Take for example a moment from the book when the two have eloped and come across a cliff by the river and Kajinsha points at a rock to tell a story:

> 'Once', he said, 'a man and his wife had no children. So they went to a powerful kambring who performed a puja and then a daughter was born to them. But in the tug of war between man and spirits, the girl was claimed by the spirit of a bird and she had to go and live with him. Before going away forever she returned once, accompanied by a tiger, to pay the bride price, and her spirit husband helped to clear the fields in the form of a mighty wind. Her parents were sad, but there was nothing they could do about it. Their daughter told them that every day she would spread her red garment on that rock, there,' Kajinsha pointed, 'and every morning a cock would crow to let her parents know that she was alive and well. For four years the old couple looked at the rock and saw their daughter's bright cloth spread out on it. Then one day the rock was bare.' Kajinsha stopped. 'So we disappear. Who remembers? (Dai, 66)'

The moment Kajinsha points to a physical rock to contextualize the story of the daughter and the spirit-bird, he transitions the narrative from a 'casual folktale' to a 'spatial reality.' In Mamang Dai's work, the landscape is not merely a setting but a witness. The rock *exists* in real life, which aligns with the magic realist tenet of the 'hesitation-free' supernatural. For the indigenous mind, the '*bright cloth spread out on the rock*' is as much a geographical fact as the mountain itself. This demonstrates spatial memory - where history is not recorded in books but is etched into the topography of the land.

As Wendy Faris notes in her theories on magic realism, the presence of 'primordial energy' in a text often allows the landscape to exert a physical agency. In Dai's writing, this is manifested through a 'spatial memory' where the land acts as a repository for an unwritten past hidden beyond the mountain wall.

The story is also profoundly reflective of tribal culture, particularly in its depiction of the 'bride price' (locally known as *Arr-ong* or *Konyar Mulyo*). In the tale, the spirit-husband pays the bride price not through currency, but through a 'mighty wind' that helps clear the fields. This mirrors the authentic cultural practices of most tribes in Arunachal Pradesh like the Adis, Mishmees, and Galos.

As explored in Dr. Mie Dirchi's analysis of Lummer Dai's *Bride Price*, this ritual is deeply tied to the labor and agricultural value of women. Dirchi notes that the bride price was traditionally a 'compensation' for the loss of a daughter's labor in her natal home. By having the spirit-husband clear the fields, the folklore reinforces the idea that the "bride price" is a form of acts of service. Whether it is 'clearing fields, planting, or bringing in Mithun (the ritualistic bovine),' the bride price represents a transfer of energy and resources that sustains the community's survival.

The belief system of the tribals is so strong that you can see it also being the catalyst of the story in certain ways. Dreams are not just figments of one's imagination for the natives, but considered foretellings and premonitions.

Highly regarded shamans - responsible for performing rituals (called *'miris'* in the book) get visions that tell about the upcoming future. According to them, the tribals '*came from a land beyond the skies. It is there where they will return when they die* (Dai 183).'

Father Krick, or the 'Miglun' (foreigner) priest has the vision of the 'other' in the novel and looks *at* the community rather than *with* them. After having observed them for quite some time, he realises that the people had no faith in drugs and medical diagnosis. '*Everything that befell a man came from the spirit world and the only physician was the shaman who could intercede with the spirits that caused human beings to fall ill and die* (Dai, 178)'. So when there comes a fire one night in Mebo after the arrival of the 'white' priest, the natives try to extinguish it by praying, rather than throwing water at it. Their superstitious nature also makes them believe that letting the outsider in was the reason their 'fire god' was angry in the first place.

Hence, *The Black Hill* serves as a poignant representative of the friction between a colonial 'white vision' and indigenous spirituality. This juxtaposition highlights how magic realism, in the context of Arunachal Pradesh, fundamentally diverges from European literary traditions such as surrealism, absurdism, or fantasy.

A more descriptive picture is painted in *The Legends of Pensam*, where the reader can delve directly into the worldview of the Adis. The book represents the total immersion into the tribal ontology. The Adi word, *Pensam* (meaning 'in between') serves as the ultimate theoretical framework for Dai's magic realism. In the book, it is a lingering equilibrium where the boundaries between the Duyang villages and the spiritual realm are porous, or as Dai describes - '*the small world where anything can happen and everything can be lived; where the narrow boat that we call life sails along somehow in calm or stormy weather; where the life of a man can be measured in the span of a song.*'

A good example of this would be the appearance of the water-serpent *Birbik,* which serves as the quintessential magical-realist 'hesitation.' It is the moment where the reader (and sometimes the characters) cannot decide between a rational, natural explanation for an event and a supernatural one. While a Western reader might view it as a hallucination, for the Adi characters, it is a factual, biological event with metaphysical consequences, as quoted:

> "The serpent was a sign. Its presence was a warning... a message from the river spirits that the balance had been disturbed" (*Dai 42*)

Similarly, the miti-mili, a race of supernatural beings who introduced *si-ye* (the sacred yeast used for brewing rice beer), are woven into the community's ritual knowledge. Dai records that before their disappearance, the miti-mili 'gave this sacred powder to mankind, and a strong belief grew that si-ye had special powers and that it was something to be handled with respect' (Dai, 28).

Such episodes illustrate how the supernatural operates as an epistemic reality rather than metaphor. What may appear bizarre and irrational to mainstream rationality is imbued with sense and reason within the tribal consciousness. This acceptance of supernatural logic without narrative justification firmly situates Dai's work within magic realism.

As discussed earlier, shamans play a huge role in the trial community - being responsible for performing rituals. These rituals are not just for driving away illness - but also fighting 'evil' spirits that may interfere with the human realm. In *The Legends of Pensam*, there is an episode involving a so-called 'ghostly tree.' Dai recounts how a man, after standing beneath this tree, begins to hallucinate and subsequently erupts into violent behaviour. Crucially, the narrative does not frame this transformation as a case of insanity or emotional instability. The tree itself

is described as 'ghostly,' already marking the space as spiritually charged rather than psychologically neutral. The man's hallucinations are thus not symptoms to be diagnosed, but signs of spirit intrusion or ecological disturbance. Illness or madness are frequently understood as indicators that something has gone wrong in the relationship between humans, spirits, and the environment.

Ultimately, Mamang Dai's deployment of magic realism in *The Legends of Pensam* serves as a profound act of decolonial resistance, asserting the sovereignty of tribal epistemology over the globalized 'logic' of the modern world. By refusing to provide rational justifications for the 'boy who fell from the sky', a rain goddess that plays and laughs in dreams, or the spiritual realm, Dai maintains the sanctity of the Pensam - that "in-between" space where the miraculous and the mundane coexist without hierarchy. This narrative mode allows the Adi community to bypass the reductive binaries of Western thought, such as nature versus culture or myth versus history. Instead, Dai presents a 'total immersion' into a reality where the forest is a sentient participant and memory is a spatial force.

Conclusion

The literary contributions of Mamang Dai serve as a vital bridge between indigenous epistemology and the global framework of magic realism. By integrating the animistic belief systems of Arunachal Pradesh into her narratives, Dai redefines the supernatural not as an abnormal occurrence, but as an inherent, everyday component of the tribal lived experience. Her work demonstrates a unique spatial memory, where the landscape of the North-East is not merely a backdrop but a sentient witness and repository of history. Through concepts like '*Pensam*' Dai challenges Western binaries of nature versus culture, offering instead a holistic vision where humans, spirits, and the environment coexist in a delicate equilibrium. Ultimately, her writings function as a form of decolonial resistance, asserting that tribal myths and ecological reflections are essential, authentic contributions to the broader discourse of eco-criticism and world literature.

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