Portrait Of The Erased: Navigating The ‘Gendered Spaces’ In Mamang Dai’s The Black Hill

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Abstract

In this paper, I will critically engage with gendered spaces and women's status in a tribal society and, in a similar vein, explore the physical and spiritual journey of the female protagonist Gimur from restraint to freedom in Mamang Dai’s The Black Hill. Dai's writing includes an extensive discussion of the region's spiritual, religious, and mythical realities. Over the years, the geographical entity known as ‘North East India’ has seen it all: wars, extremist militancy, and separatist struggle. The novel, however, is set long before the region was opened up to the global world for resource extraction; it is set at the beginning of a dark chapter in colonial history: of the colonizers’ excavation and destruction of the region one area at a time. The text solely illustrates the ramifications it bore for the many tribes and sub-tribes in Arunachal Pradesh in the 19th century, as well as what it meant for Gimur, the representative of indigenous women across the land. The primary goal of our paper is to highlight the nexus between local patriarchal structures and socially sanctioned spaces, its consequences on tribal, indigenous women like Gimur against the backdrop of the colonialist expansion mission of the British.

Keywords: gendered spaces, tribes, woman, patriarchy, Gimur, female body, Mamang Dai

Introduction

In the dark, unknown world a torch was burning in her heart. This is everything, she thought. This is what I wanted, and it is happening. I am free! Her life, she felt, was rushing like a stream in her veins, in the stretch and bend of her legs as they climbed hills after hills...(Dai,61)

The liberating expression of joy echoed in these lines highlights the insidious patriarchal mechanisms at work. Moreover, the utterance of these lines reveals a clear objective of the
oppressive patriarchal legislators: women should not stray beyond the space designated for them. In this paper, we will critically engage with gendered spaces and women's status in a tribal society and, in a similar vein, explore the physical and spiritual journey of the female protagonist Gimur from restraint to freedom in Mamang Dai's The Black Hill. Women’s limited access to space, the division of knowledge and work between men and women leading to gender stratification is the main theme of this paper.

Not unbeknownst to us, women's voices have been silenced in the most atrocious way imaginable for a long time. It is a well-known fact that male artists' documented work has attempted to hijack or appropriate the genius of women, be it in literature or art, for a long time. Margaret Keane's husband, Walter Keane, took false credit for her famous 1960s trademark paintings titled the "Big Eyes", this is a well-known act of intellectual theft. Women, despite their visible presence in civil society, were discouraged from treading the path on their own, towards greater knowledge because it would disqualify them from the “marriage market”. Restrictions were exercised on her movement to preserve the so-called “purity” of her spirit and body.

A woman wielding a pen was ostracised and vilified. She was nothing short of a vicious monster. Male writers, connoisseurs of literature and art, passed regressive laws without consulting their female counterparts. Her sex role was naturally subsumed under the identity of the male artist's ever presiding grace. Her interest in the arts, sciences and the world, in general, was discouraged. Despite these constraints, we are fortunate to witness the formidable strength and courage of brilliant minds from around the world, most notably the East where they were doubly oppressed by colonialist structures and outmoded gender laws. Women since have challenged the physical and psychological barriers imposed by the ‘Law of the Father’ (Lacan). In this paper, we shall explore the rich world of the resilient yet unrestrained Mamang Dai with a special focus on her novel The Black Hill. Dai's writing includes an extensive discussion of the region's spiritual, religious, and mythical realities. She is a poet, novelist, and journalist who has over the years actively lent her voice to the causes and concerns of the people of Arunachal Pradesh, and in doing so has graciously offered us, readers, a peek into their way of life.

Of Gimur and her world: demarcation of spaces

Over the years, attempts have been made to homogenize the narratives emerging from the geographical location known as the ‘North-East’. Consisting of eight states, the region is replete with “different ethnic communities, all of which have created a rich mosaic of ethnocultural roots and multiple identities” (Sharma and Banerjee,02) Thus, it is strange and quite ludicrous of critics when they conveniently flatten the multiple layers of meanings ensconced in the literary landscape of a text. The plot in The Black Hill does not exist as a self-sufficient whole; it is rather the unique story of a people - in this case, the different tribes of Arunachal Pradesh who suffered at the hands of the Migluns (the British). At the center of this plot survives the story of Gimur, a woman born into the Abor tribe in what is now Assam, and Kajinsha, a Mishmee tribal chief. It is their interaction with Father Nicholas Krick "priest
(who)... walked across these hills carrying a cross and a sextant” which informs the theme of colonialism in the novel.

Tribes are often deemed to be original settlers inhabiting a particular territory since pre-modern times. Most often such groups of indigenous settlers exhibit a diverse set of customs, rituals, native laws, and traditions. The tribal people, since time immemorial, have formed a close association with the natural habitat. The reliance on the forest produce for sustenance has engendered an organic way of living for the tribes. In this regard, the Abor tribe is no different.

…My father also told me that everything on earth and sky is connected since we are born of the same mother. It is very simple. We belong to the land. The land is a good mother. I take only what I need. Animals and trees offer themselves.

Yet, such idyllic habitats are too, dictated by gendered demarcations of spaces, often coalesced with sanctioned by the customary laws of various tribes. The prevalent oral narratives of many of the tribes ‘reflect a broad spectrum of marginalization of women’ (Chakraborty, Buoungpui 74). In a given tribal society, men are traditionally sanctioned greater accessibility to the public space whereas women are mostly confined to the private space. Traditionally, the tribal men have practiced masculine roles like being hunter-gatherers, warriors, chieftains of the clans, and custodians of tribal laws. Moreover, men are traditionally obliged to “provide for the family; to uphold the traditions of their society, to defend the honor of their women and keep out marauding tribes from entering their territories...” (Mukhim, 10) On other hand, the women are primarily identified with the kinship roles in relation to men i.e. wife, mother, daughter, sister, etc. Gender is a socially constitutive element in a given society that often becomes evident in the classification of space(s) and different roles that are purposefully ascribed to men and women. As a gendered category, the tribal women of Abor tribe too, face a similar set of gender-based discriminations and social inequality. In the traditional Abor society, the ‘masculine’ identity of men, among other signifiers, is intrinsically connected with the ownership of land which was exclusively a male possession. “Since the time he became the head of his clan Kajinsha had faced many challenges, but the biggest of them all was claim over the land.”(112). For the men, their relation to the land informs their dominant identity, whereas for women their economic position and social rank is determined by their ability to produce offspring and manage the family.

The novel opens with a poignant tone foretelling the anticipated journey of Gimur, a young woman, seen standing atop the hills, deep in a reverie of thought. Throughout the novel, we often find her lost in thoughts navigating the terrain of her mind. Even in the tribal society, it is deemed appropriate for women to take care of all the domestic (feminine) chores; whereas the (privileged) exclusion of men from domestic activities like cooking reiterates the cultural conditioning of men and women as ‘distinct’ gendered entities. In the novel, the character of Moi tells Gimur,
‘A woman must obey,’ she told Gimur. If a woman looks after the house, prepares food, and feeds her husband and her children she will be loved, and she will be happy.” (48)

Thus, the possibility of attaining happiness for a woman is indefinitely linked with the performance of gendered roles and absolute obedience. The customary laws of a tribe play an insidious role in the naturalization of gender roles. Unlike her aunt, Moi who unquestioningly subscribes to the sexist principles of her time, Gimur, through her distinct understanding of the norms, defies them over and over again. Gimur openly challenges the restrictions thrust upon her by the masculine-patriarchal society by attempting to carve her own niche in the world, away from the masculine world and into a world of her own.

Public – Male/ Private - Female

The dominance of patriarchal notions apropos to the constitution of the public sphere for women in different traditional societies is pervasive in nature. Historically women had little scope for social participation. There was in fact negligible presence of women in the public institutions across the globe. Such practice of controlling women’s involvement in matters beyond the domestic sphere is evident in the structural constitution of the tribal societies also. The prevalent customary laws of a tribe often act as powerful directives for the purpose of fashioning acceptable roles for men and women. It has its own of punitive measures to proscribe any potential transgression by the women folk. Customary laws could be interpreted as ‘as an established system of immemorial rules which evolved from the way of life and natural wants of people, the general context of which was a common knowledge, coupled with precedents applying to special cases, which were retained in the memories of the chief and his counselors, their sons and their son’s son, until forgotten, or until they became part of the immemorial rules’ (Bekkar, Buongpiu 77). The customary laws of the tribes, in relation to property rights, land holdings, marriage, and divorce are often exercised, mostly by the male chieftains to validate the status and the roles assigned to the women.

Abor villages were secure enclaves where the rules of tradition were crossed. Inter-tribe relationships were a betrayal to the community and girls marrying outsiders were spurned, useless like mustard seed scattered to the winds. (Dai, 46)

These rigid laws favored only one part of the population. Ideas of gender equality and free access to places eluded the agents of patriarchy. Thus, it left little scope for the women of a given tribe to exercise their own agency. According to the permissible codes of conduct, a woman within a tribe is considered to be the custodian of cultural and racial purity. In a traditionally masculine Abor tribe, women stand for what is conceived to be the feminine principle. Therefore, from a very young age, the girl is schooled as part of her daily lessons on becoming an ideal woman.

An Abor girl should behave according to custom. Every girl is an asset to her family and a man taking her away in marriage must compensate her parents for depriving them of a daughter.” (45)
The custom of offering bride price, though perfunctorily establishes the importance of the female member of a family who often lends a significant hand in cultivation and livestock farming (gendered feminine roles) it quite paradoxically also underscores the position of women which is that of ‘disposable commodity’ after attaining a certain age. The gendered identity of a woman is primarily conditioned by the prevalent socio-cultural conditions of societies. And where does one intensely experience the pressure of being a “women” – the ‘powerless’ and ‘exploited’ figure? It is in the figure of the mother. In the novel, Gimur goes through a period of self-doubt after failing to produce a healthy male child. She is aware of the unspoken yet sanctified law of the society – that for her to “seal her marital status with Kajinsha was to bear his child again” (Dai,128) and not just any child. It must be a healthy male child.

These notions dictate the movement and participation of women in the public sphere. Depending on this, women enjoy lesser or greater access to the socio-political space where men have more often than not absolute entitlement. The scopes for socialization for women are often dictated by the dominant patriarchal mores. The notion of socialization which is defined as the “process through which people come to know about the expectations of society” (Anderson & Howard, 77), bears far-reaching consequences upon young boys and girls alike, often the prescription and prohibition of the social roles assigned to boys and girls, in later stages become deeply embedded in the psyche of men and women. It is seen that the formation of the ‘self’ is relational to the perception of the ‘other.’ In a patriarchal society, the biological male is often deemed to be a superior entity whereas the female becomes the Other. Likewise in a given tribal society, masculine traits are more often valorised in relation to what is considered as feminine. Such gender specifications get translated into acute spatial and cultural segregations. The cultural privilege of masculine traits over the feminine has perpetuated the stereotypical notions with regard to women. Such socio-cultural prejudices have ensued discriminatory and unjust practices against women.

**Becoming and Unbecoming: Gimur’s journey**

The process of becoming a woman starts at an early age so that later she could become an ‘obedient’ and ‘dutiful’ wife. Women’s lives more or less within a patriarchal society get entangled in the complex web of social adherence and conformity. They are expected to perform one’s prescribed role accordingly. After running away with Kajinsha, Gimur subconsciously ruminates about the tasks at hand.

“Gimur took over the duties associated with the woman of a house. Kajinsha had …separate spots for hunting, fishing, and catching rodents and birds…” (81)

The notions of patriarchy, within the Abor tribe, demands strict adherence to the specific roles assigned to men and women. Yet, Gimur is rebellious. She dared to marry Kajinsha who is from another tribe. To add to the ire of the people, she dared to transgress the cultural and psychological confinements that she has internalized as an Abor girl/woman. That she undertook such a challenging journey with Kajinsha to escape the hostility of her tribe following her elopement with him astonishes everyone in her native village. Her act of defiance, rejecting the customs of her tribe paves the way for her quest for a life unrestrained.
Many years later, people who knew Gimur were still wondering how she had dared to make this journey. Her father had been a brave man…Her mother had been obedient and superstitious. Where had the girl’s wild streak come from? Who could say?” (63)

Acts of transgression on the part of Gimur, could be read as a portrayal of the strong urge of a woman to subvert ‘the validity of customs that have become inimical to a changing world’ (Misra, 2007)

Women, owing to systematic and structural gender discriminations, have been relegated to the margins of the historical accounts. They have, over and over again, been subjected to the careless act of historical erasure. (Her) stories are often forgotten where historical narratives are exceedingly replete with the stories of men, their valor, and courage. In a patriarchal society, women find little scope to validate their own agency. The woman’s body through the ages has become a site ‘invested with power’ (owing to its ability to nourish new life) and ‘acute vulnerability(Rich 102). She is both the embodiment of mother nature and evil incarnations- thus her body is a space of ambivalent cultural significations. They are expected to remain passive and behave as conformists in a world predominately characterized by hegemonic masculine traits. Throughout the pages of history, the voice of women has had found little resonances. Their silence is quite deafening! In the novel, sometimes, Gimur thinks about her mother and wishes to know,

What had they desired? What secrets had they buried in their hearts? Women were anonymous, forgotten in the story of bloodlines.” (Dai,63)

In every symbolic system, in every political space, the fear of the unknown and the public have rendered women silent. Timur does not let this persist anymore. She forges a spiritual bond with the land, the revered Mother Earth, and aggressively pursues the power bestowed upon her by this sacred relationship. The text is overflowing with nature imagery and metaphors, many of which symbolizes the free spirit of Mother Earth. The following lines capture the genuineness of her deep connection with the Nature world.

Her soul was in a flight, soaring high above this unknown land and Kajinsha was an eagle, watching her flight and calling her to enter the freedom of the sky. She felt weightless, lifted by a strong gust of wind….she knew that now there was no turning point. (Dai, 62)

Like the men in the text, she constructs meaning out of her relationship with the land. For her, the land signifies an ever-expanding space where she can draw the dreams of her mind. She explores lands beyond the boundaries of her village with Kajinsha, as well as her sexuality, womanly being, and native strength. In doing so, Gimur “writes herself” (Cixous) into existence, initiating a re-birth of her soul and mind. Through Gimur, Mamang Dai conscientiously establishes the authority of the female body and female authorship. So, when Lendem says “You are a torn branch hanging from a tree” (Dai, 47), Gimur, although offended at first, transforms her situation radically. Like an aloof branch, she strays from the social
conventions of her tribe and chooses her own destiny. She exercises her own agency and appropriates the social and gender identity of what an ‘Abor girl’ should be.

Conclusion

North-east India has succumbed to the ills that have ravaged the land. Over the years, the land has seen it all: wars, extremist militancy, and separatist struggle. The novel, however, is set long before the region was opened up to the global world for resource extraction; it is set at the beginning of a dark chapter in colonial history: of the colonizers’ excavation and destruction of the region one area at a time. The text solely illustrates the ramifications it bore for the many tribes and sub-tribes in Arunachal Pradesh in the 19th century, as well as what it meant for Gimur, the representative of indigenous women across the land.

Gimur’s unique spatial and geographical location makes her life story distinctive and different from other accounts of gendered oppression. In highlighting the predicament of women from The Hills (Arunachal Pradesh), the text deliberately exposes the tendencies of feminist scholars in universalizing women’s accounts from ‘Third World’ countries. The text challenges the concerted attempt of feminist scholars to “discursively colonize the material and historical heterogeneities of the lives of women in the third world, thereby producing/representing a composite, singular ‘third world woman’ - an image which appears arbitrary constructed but nevertheless carries with it the authorizing signature of western humanist discourse.” (Mohanty, 62-63). While we do notice a similarity in terms of the society’s treatment of women as expressed in the following lines ‘So’, she thought,’ among Migluns too, a woman’s name is forgotten so soon.’ (29), Gimur’s story is an isolated as well as a conjoined tale of might and courage.

At Kajinsha’s place, she struggles to establish her position and make herself heard by the people. And while this was not an easy feat, for Gimur it becomes even more difficult because to mark her presence in this new land would mean a direct compromise of her belief system and principles. It is this pronounced awareness of her ‘self’ and ‘subjectivity’ with regard to the oppressive laws of the tribal society tipped in favour of the men which informs the core theme of this paper. Although no woman named Gimur exists in any record of that period, we are aware that her spirit and voice are eternal for she lives among us through stories, in the air, in the land around us.

Bibliography

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