

Resisting Modernity in “The Black Hill” by Mamang Dai

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ABSTRACT: The colonial expansion due to the industrial revolution has left an impact all over the world. It has created a case for modernity as essential to civilize the savage colonies. This is a veiled justification of the ‘white man’s burden’ to lead the world out of darkness. Modernity in the form of globalization has spread its roots all over the world with various tools at its disposal such as religion, history, literature and pedagogy. The covert agenda is to exert more and more power to nullify indignities by overpowering their culture and way of life with the use of violence as an when required, crushing any resistance that comes in its way. Critics like Edward Said, Louis Althusser and Micheal Foucault have given considerable impetus to the study of this interaction between modernity and indigeneity.

This paper aims to apply the conceptions of these theorists in the novel” *The Black Hill*’ (2014) by Mamang Dai. In this novel we are transported back in time to the unexplored regions of Arunachal Pradesh during the nineteenth century. She chooses a setting where tribal people led a harmonious life amidst nature. Social taboos were not rigid in those times as they were leading their own indigenous lifestyle. All of this changed when they came under the radar of the British Empire. An overzealous Jesuit named Priest Nicholas, whose sole aim was to spread the light of the Lord in this mystic land. The paper will try to show how the locals resisted against the attempts that were made to challenge their indigeneity by people they considered as outsider invading their private space.

KEYWORD: colonial, indigeneity, modernity, resistance, taboos.

Mamang Dai’s novel “*The Black Hill*” transports us back to the early 19th C of the North Eastern Frontier of India. The densely forested hills, deep gorges and cascading streams in between the foothills of Assam to Zayul Valley in Tibet was the abode to the Abor and Mishmi Hills. These innocent ‘savage mountaineers’ [Dai,42] as put by the British were living in their own indigeneity. From farming in the fertile slopes to harvesting their produce and worshipping and having deep reverence for their own Gods, Hills, Streams and Nature which pervades aspect of their lives. Everything was fine until the foreign invaders preyed its eyes on the unexplored, untouched landscape and everything changed forever.

The Protagonists Kajinsha and Gimur are the voice of protest and an emblem of Resistance towards the Colonizers, the taboos, oppression and everything that tried holding them back against what they believed. Bellona, the Roman Goddess of War was the image that came to Father Nicholas Krick’s mind every time he saw Gimur, the protagonist. A girl from the Abor tribe who possessed great vigour

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and spirit, who resisted the village traditions by marrying a man from a different tribal ethnicity, to whom she loved more than anything. On the onset of the novel itself we hear the voices of protests by Gimur's village elders after having their contact with the strangers from faraway worlds.

"Who were strangers? Everyone had heard about the British, the white men-the miglun-who were coming upriver towards Mebo in long boats. They wanted a meeting with the villagers to talk about establishing a trading post a few miles downstream from where the river turned in a wide loop hugging bare rock before it flattened out and flowed away below the sloping hill of Mebo" [Dai, 3]

But it is learnt that it is their territory now and they want gold and hence a Miglun Officer is coming to meet the villagers of Mebo. Colonial laws and restrictions have limited the indigenous people to access their ancestral land; greed of the Colonial Powers had subjugated and baffled the Indigenous people. Both the Adis and Mishmi tribes suspected that they are invading their land and forcibly bringing them under their control. And it shows the resistance towards the British and modernity they bring along with them.

"They want to talk. We will talk, but we will not show them the way here. We will meet them at the foot of the hill by the river." [Dai, 3]

Dai presents the suspicion of the villagers and the resistance they show not in vain she presents the thought of Captain Hamilton Vetch:

"The Captain thought the meeting with the villagers had gone well. Vetch was an able and experienced officer, who had been in Assam for many years serving in both Civil and Military Capacities until his appointment as Political Agent of Upper Assam. His mission was to keep an eye on the restless tribes inhabiting the hills and protect British interests. The Abor have been told about our laws. We'll see what happens." [Dai, 4]

Kajinsha the male protagonist was born in a sparsely populated region of Mishmi Hills. And the readers are given an account of the Mishmi Country dividing themselves into Kmaan, Taraon and Idu. Kajinsha for the first time hears about the British from his father in which he was told that a race of white men called the British had conquered the Ahom Kings and were now the rulers of neighbouring Assam.

Dai portrays Kajinsha as a simple and true warrior who wanted to protect his land from the foreign invaders. But unfortunately he was introduced to adversaries at a young age and became a victim of forced eviction. The resistance the warring clans showed to unite with one another and fight against the British. Now Kajinsha's sole aim was to protect his ancestral land and unite all tribes to fight against the British.

"Claims over land, possession of rivers and streams and ownership rights to hunt and fish, regularly erupted into bloody, inter-tribal feuds and no one knew when the fighting would end." [Dai7]

Mamang Dai has also attempted in documenting the tribal history of resistance towards modernity, wherein she narrates the Adi and Mishmi tribes attempts to prevent Colonial invasion of their lands. In 1839 when news reached of a plot by a Khampti Chief to rise against British he was stripped of his title and dignity and when he called for help.

"It was a chance Kajinsha's father could not miss. In the death of the night he led a group of men south to the Khampti villages dotted around the banks of Burhampooter River. They joined hands with 500- armed Khampti warriors who advanced on the British station from all directions. In the surprise attack the British Political Agent Colonel Adam White and his forces numbering some eighty men were butchered and all but two sepoy lines burnt to the ground. In the fighting Kajinsha's father had been

fatally wounded.” [Dai 9]

The Old man before his death uttered the words

“Be ready my son; Prepare yourself” [Dai, 11]

Kajinsha’s Father as a true Mishmi warrior shared the same hatred for the British as The Abors and feared being brought under control. Perhaps it was the resistance that he sought against the invaders that he was warning his son to prepare himself for. As Kajinsha raised his elbows and cupped his chins and realized that

“British were strong; they had gunboats and hundreds of soldiers.” [Dai10]

Lendem introduces Kajinsha to Gimur where his aim of uniting the other tribes can be seen clearly through the following lines

“His village is quite far away, said Lendem. He was here visiting the Idu clans of Anuda village. They came together. Everyone is interested in what has happened, you know. And don’t worry, he said, looking at her frightened face, no one wants the British to come into hills. The elders have decided, and we, all tribes, we are together in this. If the Migluns want to use force, just let them try.” [Dai, 24]

The seventeen year old Gimur whose eyes are often focused on the sky waiting for the moon to raise and imbibe her. She has a blue tattoo on her chin which marks her as a part of Mebo village. She was pampered by her mother, friend Nago and a brother cum friend Lendem. She was taught to behave according to the custom and believes of the community. She was taught *“that 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. This was the Customary bride price called a-re gelik.”* [Dai, 45]

But Gimur was an emblem of resistance in her own way and had her own set of mind and believes. She was

“...uncontrollable and daring, more like a boy..” [Dai,2]

She marries Kajinsha who is settled at the borders of Tibet. Gimur knew ‘inter-tribe ‘were a betrayal to the community and girls marrying outsiders were

“Spurned, useless like mustard seeds scattered in the winds.” [Dai, 46]

The novelist carefully narrates thoughts regarding the Foreign invaders giving the readers a glimpse of her strong and wilful mind.

“In her mind the British were a fearsome race of people who had appeared suddenly from nowhere. They travelled up and down the country trying to enter other people’s land without any respect for anyone. They possessed fire arms and punished anyone who tried to stop them. When they reached a place they ordered everyone to obey them. Someone should teach them a lesson she thought.” [Dai,18]

Kajinsha and Gimur’s love thrives and they take the chance of life beyond, where there is only and they decide to move to Kajinsha’s land crossing the terror of the hill. All they wanted was to strive and live a happy life of their own. It is clear with the following narration of the novelist.

“All he wanted was his life, his life with Gimur and their newborn son....to fall asleep at night without guilt or fear” [Dai, 115]

This peace was shattered when a overzealous Jesuit Priest Nicholas Krick enter the unexplored hills. He had his own dream and pursuit of establishing a Church in Tibet whose sole aim was to spread the Light of the Lord in this mystic land. And determined to fulfil his purpose he has to pass through the Mishmi Hills to reach the land of his dream-“TIBET “ The determined highly ambitious Priest Krick

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was someone who was not easily deterred by the unfamiliar terrains and unwelcoming tribes. In spite of his first failed visit to Tibet it did not stop him of pursuing his dream again. When he was asked to go back to Assam, it had hurt him deeply but he remained firm in his belief and clung on with missionary faith, prepared to even die in Tibet if need be. While the villagers bid him farewell he thought

“One day, yes one day I will return and everything will be changed. Now you do not know how I came to proclaim the good news of eternal light and life, but one day these hills will echo with proclamation and song.”[Dai, 135]

The determined father Nicholas Krick true to his words sets his foot again on the mystic land where a year ago he was stripped of his everything in the jungle. Many a times he stumbled and fell on his knees and prayed. But no amount of injury, temptation or even hunger could deter him from his holy mission. Somewhere deep inside he knew there was another world of light and love that would heal every wound and he would never ever walk alone again. Most of the Mishmi tribes agreed to help Father Nicholas in his journey by allowing him to travel through the Mishmi Hills to reach Tibet. Kajinsha considered Father Nicholas as his friend and decides to help him. On their way they had to face the terror of nature as well as the hostile tribes. They knew the Priest was harmless but they developed a sense of strangeness and resistance towards him:

“He is not a soldier. But we have to be alert.. He is still a white foreigner- a kla kamphlung! Who knows about these people? To us they are all strangers.”[Dai,78]

The unwelcoming and hostile behaviour of the tribes are rightly not surprising because they had often seen that once the Priests come, the British also follows with their guns and garrisons. The intelligent, devout Father Nicholas’ resistance towards understanding the Tribal resulted in the tragic impact on so many lives he encounters and of all the true warrior Kajinsha. In the land of tribals the White Priest became the “other” and when they doubt him they let him starve and when they realized his true intentions he was shown humility.

In this historical novel Dai do not portray Kajinsha as the killer of Father Nicholas Krick. It was the well concocted plan of Marpa – the mean, greedy and a man who had a grudge against Kajinsha and his clan. Once he was trapped by Marpa into marrying a Tibetan girl so that Kajinsha and his tribes would be obliged to protect the Tibetans from colonial invasion as the Mishmi Hills marked the frontline defense of the country. Apart from this they crawled slowly into the lands of Mishmi People. Now after Father Nicholas is killed, Kajinsha could sense Marpa’s evil plan when he focuses on the word ‘ lama’ :

“Who else could it be but Marpa,....he thought. Marpa must have paid Lamet to do it. Lamet would do anything for a price, even if it was only a bag of grain.....the presence of Lamet would fuel suspicion and enmity between clans . Marpa was showing doubt. If the ruse worked no one would know who was to blame and everyone would turn against one another and Marpa would sit back and watch them cut each other down.”[Dai, 249]

The Tibetan Lama’s deceiving Kajinsha and concocting plan to kill the White Priests throws light on Kajinsha and the British assuming him as the murderer under the given circumstances. The British would be outraged and

“Kajinsha knew that this act would not go unpunished. The Whiteman would hunt them down”[Dai, 249]

Kajinsha felt angry and at the same sympathise toward the White Priest whose determination to establish a church in Tibet is the reason of his death now. He wanted to shout it aloud.

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“Now look what has happened, just because of your stupid God and your Tibet! Tibet! Now you are dead! Where is your God now? Ah.....! Priest, you should have waited for me! What does it matter what a man believes, if it is the same or different from your beliefs, as long as he has a life that he knows and loves?”[Dai, 249]

It took eight long days of forced march to the troops of twenty Assam Light Infantry and forty Khampti Volunteers to reach Kajinsha’s village and finally capture him. He was kept as prisoner in Debroogurh Jail and eventually Kajinsha received a death penalty. During his last moments still Kajinsha resisted the British in thoughts.

‘A man cannot return to earth after his death...But I can look up, and the sky is limitless’ [Dai 285]

Dai’s wavering three main characters symbolizes resistance in different ways. A tale of love, resistance and freedom. The tribal resistance towards Migluns can be understood as they know the motives of Migluns. They came luring with gifts in the form of Tobacco, Silk, Iron Salt and lastly takes away their land. Hence, the tribes inhabiting the in between area stretching from Assam to Tibet were determined to take stand against the British who *“may conquer the world but they will never take our land.”*[Dai, 25] These people are neither inferior nor their history or religion is. They cannot be subdued and oppressed by others. As Kajinsha puts it:

“ We have a life and our lives are also ruled by gods.”[Dai, 139]

The Priest shows resistance in understanding Kajinsha’s religion and is baffled at the same towards his unyielding faith. Kajinsha tells him *“This people do not need books to uphold their religion, they read the land. The land is their book.”* [Dai 140]

This is the story of their bravery and they would stand and fight rather than surrender their right to the land. These acts of aggression maybe oppressed with words but the voices of Kajinsha and Gimur live forever. Their identities cannot be erased by the British invaders as the pluralities of voices assert different identities through unending tales. Kajinsha and Gimur symbolizes the sky and the earth and their story lives forever.

As in her prologue Dai admits, *“ a man whose shoulders touched the sky ”*[Dai,ix] and ends with a story that can be told again and again.

“the lives are ended, but a story never.”[Dai, 294]

Works cited

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