

Negotiating Roots and Routes: Migration, Myth, and Indigenous Identity in *Escaping the Land*

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Abstract

In Mamang Dai's recent novel Escaping the Land, Dai interweaves history, myth and contemporary politics to delve deeper into metaphors of roots and routes. Love for the land along with understanding the pulse of the people is the theme that runs through her work. Here, the metaphor of routes is also used to trace the journey of the land, beyond time, to the formation of the state of Arunachal Pradesh, the once "hidden land" that receives the first rays of the sun in India. The paper aims to employ coupling metaphors of roots and routes in order to understand a way of life that Mamang Dai portrays in her novel Escaping the Land. The paper would also look into the intricacies of rooting in a culture and routing out of a culture or a particular way of life practised by a community, here, the tribal people of Arunachal Pradesh.

Keywords: Arunachal Pradesh, Political novel, History, Myth, Identity

Introduction

Migration poses an inherently paradoxical and ambiguous character while being grounded in the dialectics of longing and belonging. It is in this context that one can establish the opposition of roots to routes. The movement from one geographical and cultural location to another is not simply an act of relocation; rather, it embodies a complex negotiation between aspiration and attachment, mobility and memory, departure and return. The migrant in his search for better prospects in a different land experiences a sense of ambiguity. While on one hand, migration is propelled by a desire for transformation, self-fashioning, and access to possibilities unavailable within the native homeland; on the other hand, there persists a yearning to return to familial bonds and environment. This places the migrant in a liminal condition- suspended between the impulse to move forward and the nostalgic pull of origins. Migration and dislocation have significantly affected human life since the earliest phases of civilisation. Human history itself may, in many ways, be read as a history of movements- of tribes, communities, labourers, exiles, refugees, and settlers crossing territorial, linguistic, and cultural boundaries. In the context of Northeast India, migration assumes an even more layered and politically sensitive dimension. While substantial inflows into the Northeastern region have often been foregrounded in public discourse and identified as major reasons behind ethnic conflicts, identity struggles, socio-political tensions, there has been equally significant outflows of people from the region to other parts of the country.

Mamang Dai in *Escaping the Land* revisits these histories of displacement and movement by tracing the formation of present day Arunachal Pradesh from the land of 'Kojum Kora' to being a state under the Indian government. In Dai's narrative, conflict, mobility and survival

are intertwined with the everyday lives of the people inhabiting the region. She poignantly describes the plight of villagers who lost such feuds and were forced into submission, recalling how they begged for the mercy of the marauders, “the masters of the forest” (Dai 96). Dai further notes that hundreds of families would subsequently be marched away from their burnt villages toward unfamiliar settlements that would become their new homes. The destruction of the village here symbolises not merely the loss of physical habitation but also the rupture of collective memory, ancestral continuity, and cultural rootedness. These displaced people were compelled to work as slaves within the victor’s village, occupying a subordinate social position and remaining spatially and culturally separated from the original inhabitants. Yet these processes underwent a transformation over a period of time with many captives assimilating into the dominant clan. This gave birth to new social identities and affinities. Significantly, Dai remarks that these later generations retained no memory of the places from which their ancestors had originated, nor did they express any desire to return.

Objectives of the paper

The paper aims to employ the coupled metaphors of roots and routes as a critical framework to understand the complex mode of life portrayed by Mamang Dai in *Escaping the Land*, particularly in relation to migration, displacement, memory, and belonging among the tribal communities of Arunachal Pradesh. The paper further seeks to investigate the intricacies of rooting within a cultural tradition and routing out of a particular socio-cultural way of life practiced by indigenous communities, with special emphasis on the tribal societies represented in Dai’s narrative.

Migration and Identity: Negotiating Roots and Routes

Routes often disturb the placidity of roots. There is this tension between rootedness and mobility as we try to destabilize rootedness as a marker of identity. Identity is viewed not as static or territorially fixed but as constantly shaped by movement, displacement, and cultural negotiation (Gilroy 19–25). In Mamang Dai’s novel *Escaping the Land*, Umsi’s life in Shillong and then later in Delhi is symbolic of this disturbance of routes. She moves out of Pasighat for the first time during the Chinese aggression. It is in Delhi that she indulges in affairs that put her in trouble. Although she is brought back to her home in Pasighat, it is for a short sojourn. Her marriage to a tea plantation official detaches her from her roots once again taking her to Delhi. Umsi’s husband Karan was a tea garden manager in Assam when she married him. A reference is made to the Assam Movement when groups of men were engaged in collecting money from businessmen and the tea planters. Sensing that life would be risky because of such acts, after the birth of their daughter Umsi and Karan left Assam. Karan returned to his family business in real estate construction in Palampur. For few years Umsi lived in a world of romance, travel being her forte. She was lost in a sea of glittering cities and summer holidays in scenic islands; until one day in one such vacation, Umsi longed to go back home; to her roots. A sense of desolation overcame her when she realised how far she had come from home; both in physical and metaphorical terms. Images of travel and return are employed by Dai consistently to portray the emotional estrangement that Umsi feels. While her life in a big city is exciting with all the glimmer and shimmer of city life, she feels a sense of loneliness in a place which initially seemed to offer her freedom. This is a displacement that she experiences. In a way, through the emotional estrangement of Umsi, Dai highlights that routes have a meaning only when they are attached to the roots.

Migration and displacement in the novel therefore emerge not merely as physical movement but as emotional and psychological negotiations with identity. This ambiguity of migration

involves a tussle between belonging and displacement. According to Stuart Hall, It is not simply physical movement but a process of becoming which involves memory, interactions, adaptability and experience (225). Dai portrays routes as journeys that often intensify one's awareness of roots. In the novel, after being deserted by her husband, Tanik's mother sets out on a route to fend for herself and her young son. She leaves the village in search of a better life for her son. Then, there are stories about Tanik's father. While some said he was living in a faraway place where people were cutting trees and selling them; others said that he had gone away to become a soldier and lived in one of the towns in the plains. Tanik's mother ventures on a new route for the sake of her son's future but she resorts to her roots to strengthen her future resources. She resorts to a long-forgotten gift that she possessed- the art of weaving. She gets herself a job in one of the weaving centres set up by the NEFA government. Tanik grows up into an ambitious politician. He has enough for himself and his mother but his mother never gives up weaving. Weaving becomes her identity marker. Weaving becomes a metaphor of a mother's blessings for her son. According to Sarwal in his work *South Asian Diaspora Narratives*, the act of weaving may also be interpreted through indigenous feminist perspectives where traditional crafts function as repositories of cultural memory, continuity, and women's agency within tribal communities (87). Tanik, as a grownup politician remembers the reassurance and comfort he found in his roots; here symbolised by his mother's weaving:

His mother spun cotton on a wooden spindle and she was spinning his life, spinning colour and texture, spinning dreams and desire. Each movement of her hand over the shimmering band of cloth, smoothing it, pressing it down, pulling it taut, each thread she lifted, each strand she wove, each beat of the sumpu and each time she leaned back a little and began again was a magical expression of a mother's blessings for her son. (Dai 135)

Here, weaving is very much associated with identity and cultural memory. It becomes an act of everyday life associated with care and memory. Through the imagery of thread, colour and texture Mamang Dai portrays how a simple everyday act attains significance in transforming into a symbolic art of cultural continuity and identity.

Myth and Indigenous Memory

A tracing of roots in *Escaping the Land* is also achieved through myths and folk narratives. Myth in the novel functions as a bridge between roots and routes. If routes represent physical journeys across landscapes and histories, myths preserve the cultural roots that enable communities to interpret those journeys. Through stories, legends, and oral memories, Dai demonstrates that movement through space is always accompanied by movement through inherited systems of knowledge and belief. Myth and identity therefore work together in shaping cultural consciousness and collective memory (Friedman 44). Myths become the path through which communities travel to the past and define their collective identity through an understanding of that past. The narrator in *Escaping the Land* believes that all these images, stories of magic, strange visitations, spirit wives are all somehow related to the Rainman. The narrator refers to a myth of secret wives through the incident in the life of a man of the Daji clan of Sirkeng. It is a story of a man who sets out hunting deeper into the forest until the known land becomes strange and unknown to him to the extent that he feels it has turned into a monster. The movement of this man is significant because his journey into the unknown symbolises his journey into a liminal space where the ordinary intersects with the unknown.

One day when he is in a deep slumber, he is caught unawares in a web of deep desire by an unknown spirit woman who seems to caress him in his sleep. He feels the pleasure of lovemaking by this unidentified spirit woman. When he wakes up, he is enmeshed by confusion- confused

by images and feelings. At the same time, he cannot deny it as an insensible dream because he wakes up to a lit fire in his hut and pot full of rice. He feels rejuvenated by the thought that this might have been a visitation by a spirit woman which means that he would be able to amass lot of wealth and fortune since a spirit wife was considered to be a boon. He does get wealthy after these visitations but at the cost of the life of his dear friend –Kakir. It is Kakir's son who later becomes the Rainman.

Stories, folktales attain significance because they provide credible explanations to the mysteries of creation, a natural phenomenon and they also strive to deliver a moral message for the betterment of the collective society. These are often orally transmitted from one generation to another and the oral narrators often structure them to suit their audiences which render authenticity to such narrations, although at times they might seem to be figments of imagination. The oral narratives preserve collective identity through generations and functions as alternative archives of indigenous knowledge (Assmann 37). The story of the spirit wife portrays how stories are a repository of collective memory. It is not simple a supernatural story but a story that demonstrates the significance of responsibility and continuity in a community. They also reflect the communities understanding of the ties between the people and the land. In a significant manner in the novel the Rainman can also be perceived as the link between roots and routes; a link/a midway between the origin and the changes brought in the land (Arunachal). He explains to the narrator the necessity to love the land as a means of reverence to the ancestors. While the narrator states that she would have to travel to different places to collect data on her land so that she can go ahead with the proposed project; the Rainman is of the view that she can understand the land only by learning to love it. The only way of loving the land is returning to the roots. It is this passionate awareness of life that the Rainman instills in the narrator. Although physically rooted in the hills, he travels symbolically across generations through stories, memory, and cultural knowledge. His presence demonstrates that routes need not always involve geographical movement; they may also signify journeys through time, memory, and ancestral consciousness. The narrator mentions:

People like the Rainman made our journeys possible because deep in our hearts we knew that through him we could find our way back to rejoin the tribe... when all of us moved in different directions thinking our destiny lay elsewhere, the Rainman stayed where he was, never venturing out beyond the circle of the hills... (Dai 111)

Although the Rainman stayed in the hills and never ventured to other places; for Umsi, he did travel- he travelled in time. For the narrator, he was what assimilated with home- the sound of rivers, rain, fire- that touch of gold from the first sun- all descriptive of the land of the rising sun. The Rainman says that the land is a being, it is not stagnant; it evolves, develops and changes over time. Indigenous ecocritical framework views land not as property but as a living spiritual entity interconnected with memory and identity (Huggan and Tiffin 136). Through the portrayal of the Rainman, Dai shows that roots are not about being stagnant, rootedness is a form of cultural anchor that gives more meaning to routes. Myths operate as routes through which indigenous roots are preserved, revisited and also reinterpreted.

Political Transformation of Arunachal Pradesh

Dai also traces the political transformation brought about in the present state of Arunachal Pradesh. She writes about the route/ journey of a land inhabited by tribes who were ruled by chiefs and often the people indulged in various inter tribe disputes and killings; to its transformation into a border state (known as NEFA) and then its final transformation into the twenty sixth state of India- Arunachal Pradesh. Dai refers to the incident of Aching Mori in October 1953 when a party of 165 men accompanied by an armed platoon of Assam Rifles had

been attacked in a small village called Aching Mori in the remote valleys beyond Assam. The unexplored fact of the land is brought about by the indication that it was a remote land which was beyond the comprehension and knowledge of the Centre; to the extent that people in the centre or in the government offices knew nothing about the place.

After people like Loomey and Dinu had avenged the murder of their village chief and had returned to their village, he realised that times had changed. According to the order of the central government tribal feuds were banned and there would be no punishment given by any tribe to another, everything would be decided by the centre. Loomey and Dinu were engaged as political interpreters and their job was to liaise between the government officials and tribesmen. In due course of time interpreters like Loomey and Dinu were ousted and their place was taken by other men of the new government referred by Dai as the “saarkari.” The drawing of maps, cartographic reorientations, the necessity of including an untamed land in the Indian territory is very efficiently brought out by Dai in her mentions to the “struggles” (Dai 12) made by a group of officers who were making every attempt to draw a cohesive map of the country’s frontiers in post independence India. This cartographic exercise may also be understood through Benedict Anderson’s notion of the nation as an “imagined community,” where maps and administrative structures become instruments for imagining and consolidating national identity (Anderson 173). While the name of Aching Mori was on everybody’s lips, ironically nobody knew the location of the place. Some confused the Aching Mori incident with the Komsing case of 1911. After the incident of 1911, in 1914 the Hills area was renamed as Frontier Tracts. Dai relooks at historical records which mention the transformation that happened over the years in Arunachal Pradesh since the Colonial rule. Initial records bear testimony to punitive expeditions followed by a perplexing series of revisions, notifications and Acts. It was the discovery of oil and tea in the plains of Assam that led to further changes in the Frontier regions. Such transformations reveal how colonial and postcolonial state structures attempted to discipline frontier spaces through administrative categorization and territorial control.

According to the Bengal Eastern Frontier Regulation of 1873, Inner Line demarcations were made to protect the commercial interests of the British territories. The Hill areas were demarcated as the North East Frontier Tracts of Assam and British subjects were prohibited from going beyond the Inner Line without a pass. Post independence in 1954, the Frontier Tracts were renamed. After the Aching Mori incident, the Frontier Tracts were renamed as North East Frontier Agency. The word “Agency” in the new nomenclature implied that this region would be directly administered by the President, through the Governor of Assam.

Land as Cultural Consciousness

Interestingly, as far as the administration was concerned, people who belonged to the region also knew very little about their land. Dai portrays the character of Lipun who ruminates on how detached the tribes of his own land were. Hailing from the town of Pasighat in the newly demarcated NEFA, Lipun is in Shillong for his higher studies when he hears about the new nomenclature of his homeland. It is then that he realises how little he knew about his land and his people. In school they were instructed in Assamese language and most of the teachers were from Assam. Although there were many tribes, these tribes did not communicate with each other. Although he had traversed on diverse routes for the sake of his education, he had an inclination to gain knowledge about his homeland so that he re-establishes his connection to his roots. When he heard about the Aching Mori incident and the reactions of government officials about the Tribal people of NEFA, he had a mixed feeling.

From being a “leave them alone” region during the British regime, NEFA becomes a land which would now be opened up for people from the rest of the country and every attempt

was made by the government to bring it into the mainstream. It is during his official visits in different places in NEFA, that Lipun comes in proximity with his roots. He traverses on various routes, meeting people from different tribes and developing a sense of camaraderie with them. These journeys are taken on foot; at times he even had to walk for fourteen days at a stretch crossing hills, valleys and rivers to reach a particular place where he was posted as a “sarkaari” official. It is Lutor, who is a young boy of five years who accompanies Lipun on these journeys. For the officials from mainland India, NEFA was a cruel place where people lost their lives in endless hostilities. There was nothing in this region- no roads, no electricity, no towns. For people like Lipun and Lutor, it was their land, a region that they fell in love with whenever they came in contact with the local tribesmen and they felt that an unknown camaraderie had developed even before they had started talking to each other. It is this feeling that makes Lipun develop confidence about his roots to the extent that when the Chinese aggression of 1962 takes place, he tells the people of the region that the hills are the safest place for them. Dai thereby challenges mainland representations of the Northeast as an “othered” frontier space, a critique that resonates strongly with postcolonial discourses of marginality and internal colonialism (Said 54). They need not leave their homeland to other parts in Assam. After the Chinese aggression of 1962, the Frontier divisions of NEFA are renamed as simple districts; each district being named after a river. There are doubts and confusion which reign both at the centre and the periphery. While the centre gazed at the Hill people with doubt, not knowing how to tackle them or stop further wars at the Frontier, the hill people too looked at the government with suspicion. In the easternmost Kameng Frontier near Tibet, the village headman opined that dark clouds engulfed the region and these dark clouds were made in the form of Indian soldiers. It is through people like Lipun in the administrative services that the centre seeks to gain the confidence of the hill people. Lipun assures the villagers that only the government can protect their land from further aggression and it is only the government which will bring about development in the land. Lipun’s travels are not merely physical movements from one place to another; they symbolise a deeper process of negotiating identity between multiple cultural worlds. People often live between different cultural influences- traditional and modern, Indigenous and colonial, local and national. identity develops in what Bhabha calls “interstitial spaces” or “in-between spaces.” These are spaces where cultures interact, overlap, and transform one another (Bhabha 56).

Dai refers to a major historical event in 1987 when the then Prime Minister of India Rajiv Gandhi visited Itanagar and formally inaugurated a fully fledged state- the state of Arunachal Pradesh with Itanagar becoming its capital. The NEFA days were over and Arunachal Pradesh became the twenty fourth state of the country on 20th February, 1987. Lutor’s rootedness is also deeply symbolic. Although he could trek mountains yet he balked at the mere thought of travelling by train or flight. His attachment to land reflects an indigenous understanding of identity where belonging is inseparable from landscape, ancestry, and collective memory.

Conclusion

Hence, through the analysis it is evident how Dai’s attempt to understand history extends beyond retrieval of forgotten narratives, it becomes an attempt to understand how communities continually reconstruct themselves through remembrance, preservation of culture and through narratives. In this regard, Jonathan Friedman in “Myth, History and Political Identity” views history itself as a form of mythical construction, insofar as it represents the past in ways that contribute to the consolidation and legitimisation of identity within the present historical moment.

In referring to the past, Dai not only indulges in the necessity of roots but also attempts to

blur the rigid binaries that conventionally separate roots from routes. The novel repeatedly demonstrates that movement away from one's place of origin does not necessarily signify a severance from roots; instead, routes themselves may become alternative pathways through which roots are rediscovered, reinterpreted, and understood with greater complexity. Migration, displacement, and mobility in the novel do not merely function as experiences of loss and alienation, but also as processes that generate introspection regarding history, ancestry, and cultural continuity. The journeys undertaken by individuals and communities complicate fixed notions of identity and belonging. Through this portrayal, Dai suggests that roots and routes exist not as oppositional categories but as mutually constitutive forces shaping indigenous consciousness and collective memory. In *Escaping the Land*, myths, oral narratives, memories, and historical accounts coexist within a shared epistemological space making the boundaries between factual accounts and cultural imagination porous. In Dai's narrative, the indigenous ways of knowing does not posit myth in opposition to history but rather presents both history and myth as parallel modes of preserving cultural experience and ancestral consciousness. The metaphors of roots and routes in *Escaping the Land* can thus be employed to look into the interweaving of history and myth. Through the intertwining of the personal and the political in the novel, Dai posits the necessity of objective history as a means of introspection and reconstruction. When Maying returns to write about the history of her land and her people, she leafs through records and stories which bear testimony to journeys through and of the land, both physically and metaphorically. Perhaps, it is in the combination of history and myth that the politics of identity and representation lies. This politics is as much about reconnecting with the past as it is of establishing an identity in the present. Dai's novel therefore reveals how indigenous identity is continuously shaped through an ongoing dialogue between memory and mobility, rootedness and displacement, preservation and transformation. By complicating the binaries of roots and routes, history and myth, past and present, *Escaping the Land* emerges as a profound meditation on the fluid yet enduring nature of cultural identity within the socio-political realities of Northeast India. Bottom of Form

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