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“The forest is my wife”: The Ethno-political and Gendered Relationship of Land and the Indigene

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Abstract

The imperative presence of land as a personified being in Indigenous Literatures asserts the crucial connection between land and the native ‘self’ in defining ‘indigeneity’. While this ‘self’ is often reclaimed in a wrestle against the geo-political confines of the nation-state; an indigenous woman, however, navigates ‘self’ in ways non-identical. Women’s connection to land, as opposed to indigenous men, shapes ethno-political struggle of proprietorship and rather builds upon shared feminine traits of fertility, nurture, and service. Focusing on the integration of gender and ecology as an important aspect of ecological critique on power and progress, this paper attempts to delineate the gendered relationship between the indigene and land. It delves into two important areas of study: firstly, probing the distinct ways the indigene ‘self’ unifies itself with the land, and secondly, critiquing the gendered dynamics involved in this merger. The study focuses on the emancipatory impediments of indigenous women by analysing select works of Easterine Kire and Mamang Dai, also, tangentially referring to a few other indigenous women’s writings from North East India.

Keywords: Land, Gender, Ethno-politics, Ecocriticism

When god-like Odysseus returned from the wars in Troy, he hanged all on one rope a dozen slave-girls... The girls were property, the disposal of property was then, as now, a matter of expediency, not of right and wrong... The ethical structure of that day covered wives, but had not yet been extended to human chattels. During the three thousand years which have since elapsed, ethical criteria have been extended to many fields of conduct, with corresponding shrinkages in those judged by expediency only. (Leopold, 1949, p. 201)

One may look at Aldo Leopold’s reference to Homer’s *Odyssey* in *The Land Ethics* (1949), and immediately recognize how Leopold set in motion reflective criticism of the position of ‘Man’ by critiquing Homer’s “god-like Odysseus” (p. 201), and attempted to redefine ‘community’ by problematizing the narrative of man as “conqueror of the land community” to “member and citizen of it”. Leopold stressed the necessity to see land and everything on it (both human and non-human) as a unified community, urging that “when we see land as a community to which we belong, we may begin to use it with love and respect” (p. 204). This renewed meaning of community, in his words, could aid nurture an “ethic of care” (p. 204) that is organically fostered through ‘experience’ and ‘connection’ with the land. However, this inspiration of the “ethic of care” becomes the very site of inquiry and debate in this paper, in order to realize the gendered relationship of land and Indigene. In the discourse of ecofeminism, the vocabulary of care has been aggressively scrutinized upon the currency of care, for care is inspired chiefly by connected

‘experience’ of nature, “that reflect” as argued by Roger. J. H. King (1991), only and “typically male set of experiences of the world” and “aspects of Patriarchal thinking” (p. 76).

While land ethic of care has been a defining code of indigenous ontology, even before its academic acknowledgment through Leopold, this paper reflects on the limitations of the vocabulary of ‘care’ in insufficiently delineating heterogeneity of gendered experiences. Also, by occasionally subscribing to ecofeminist ideology that seeks resonance between women and land, the study focuses on the emancipation of Indigenous women whose identity is often caught or neglected in the hierarchy of larger structures of violence. As pointed out by Dai in her introductory note to the edited anthology, *The Inheritance of Words, Writings from Arunachal Pradesh* (2021) that “while the joys of motherhood, love of land and questions of the self are evoked...poignant with the anguish of love, they are also fierce with resistance against what it means to be a woman in a traditional society where inherent customary laws dictate how women live their lives, something that often results in untold suffering” (p. 3).

With special reference to Kire and Dai, and few references to other indigenous women writers from North East India, the paper wields on an interdisciplinary approach to explore natural and socio-cultural histories that have been governing and continues to govern the gendered heterogeneous experiences of native subjects – men and women. Pertinent to indigenous women’s writings that idiomatically juggle between feministic discourse and the issues of nation-state, tribal nationalism and nativity, the paper proposes that literary scholarship concerning native cultures requires a striding movement from post-colonial criticism to ‘native’ feminism. Kate Shanley, argues, in the context of Native Indian experience, that “the word ‘feminism’ has special meanings to Indian women, including the idea of promoting the continuity of tradition, and consequently, pursuing the recognition of tribal sovereignty” (1984, p. 215). In the impetus of decolonization and revival of roots movement, the recent decades in indigenous studies have seen a shift from mere political and spatial recognition of the otherwise historically contingent idea of indigeneity to acknowledging the intricacies of indigenous cultural histories from the native perspective. This according to Fabricant and Poestero (2018) is “perhaps the most provocative turn in indigenous studies” (p.137) which has been mobilizing scholars to exfoliate indigenous ontologies that had gone almost extinct in the hegemony of the western knowledge system. This turn in indigenous studies aims to shake intellectual terrains that have been building on the inherited binaries of European philosophy, by focusing on Indigenous knowledge and practices as “new modes of thought” (Cameron, 2014, p.19). Based on various indigenous practices, it lays careful attention to ontological pluralism (worldviews) and stresses reconsideration of epistemology by challenging euro-centric approach to meaning, knowledge, and power. However, in lieu of this development, arbitrating the intersection of gender and nativity continues to remain complex, as more than often feminist discourse is seen as antithetical or foreign to the codes of native epistemology. Arguing upon native women’s question of belonging, Ramirez argues that “too often the assumption in Native communities is that we as indigenous women should defend a tribal nationalism that ignores sexism as part of our very survival as women as well as our liberation from colonization” (2007, p. 22). This perplexity is pronounced in the select texts, for instance, the very usage of the word Adi word ‘Pensam’ (implying in-between, middle, belonging to both) in Dai’s (2006) *The Legends of Pensam* may be seen as an attempt to emphasize on the spatial complexity of contemporary native identity – an

attempt to locate the appropriate bargain between the past and the future, and an attempt to gain agency over what needs to be continued or repudiated in the tide of change.

Hence, to recognize the intersection of gender and nativity in the context of Indigenous communities from North East India, 'native-feminism/s' that is ideologically quintessential to native experience is essentially requisite. The idiosyncratic illustration of native women's renditions, for instance, reveals in depiction of Kirhupfumia in Kire's *When the River Sleeps* (2014), with "vast store of knowledge" to answer "questions about spirit encounters" or to instruct if "what was to be done if a relative had touched stones that were taboo to touch" or to be consulted "on cures for fevers contracted in the forest... to disclose names of herbs in special areas, and how to use these to cure the fevers" (p, 146). It explains an indigenous woman's rendition, not only as an active storyteller but also as a custodian of knowledge connected to nature, as the feminine resonance of women and non-human, that extends from the physical to the spiritual realm (feminine guardian spirits of rivers and forests). Or even the silent appraisals in indigenous women's writings from Arunachal Pradesh, critiquing among others, the practice of polygamy sanctioned by customary norms – to be "traded for few mithuns to my father" (Reena, 2021, p. 44) and "when the children are grown, he decides to take another wife" (Dai, 2006, p. 77), highlighting the instrumental equivalency of women to the natural world coded in customary sanctions. Consequently, experiences of an indigenous woman traverse along multiple dimensions and the 'self' melds dual structures of enunciation – 'indigeneity' and 'womanhood'. This then creates a spatial agency that is a combination of multifaceted voices. On the one hand, there are the concerns for representation – importance of native ontology in reasserting the connection of land and indigene, geo-political histories, tribal nationalism, etc. – and on the other, the emancipation of the feminine 'self'. What makes this emancipation even more difficult is the calculated negotiation of self in the hierarchy of tribal nationalism, ecology, and gender.

With natives' proximity to land, one of the first underlining issues, voiced in Indigenous women's writings, is concerned with the various parameters of indigeneity and land-related ethnopolitics that differ for women and men. The heterogeneity of gendered participation, especially in land-related policies, materializes in matters of protection, ownership, and custody, which range from concerns of proprietorship to ethno-political concerns of instrumental subjugation of land. Whence, indigenous women are placed out the value hierarchy of decision making. It is pertinent, however, to realize that penetration of the colonial idea of 'ownership' in native ethno-politics today, stands in contrast to a native ontology that revered safekeeping of the land. Dai (2006) calls it "tribal modified" (p. 175), indicating metamorphosis into modernity that prioritizes economic health over eco-centric indigenous practices. Dai's *The Legends of Pensam* (2006) serves as a silent satire on this ironic shift in the meaning of indigeneity and its connection to the land. The recurrent presence of land as a personified being, in most of her works, distances land from being a mere geo-political entity, often nurturing the very consciousness and memory of its people. It taps on reviving the indigenous philosophy of 'community' that one shares with others, which is found in interdependency. (Kwaymullina, 2005, p. 2) As Ambelin Kwaymullina (2005) explains:

For Aboriginal peoples, country is much more than a place. Rock, tree, river, hill, animal, human – all were formed of the same substance by the Ancestors who continue to live in land, water, sky. Country is filled with relations speaking language and following Law, no

matter whether the shape of that relation is human, rock, crow, wattle. Country is loved, needed, and cared for, and country loves, needs, and cares for her peoples in turn. Country is family, culture, identity. Country is self. (para. 2)

Dai draws on the Adi ontological credence of the interdependency of nature and man, both defending each other, by crafting the narrative of her historical fiction around the personified depiction of nature – river, forest, mountains, etc. River and Mountains hold deep agency in Adi Abangs (oral histories/folk songs), serving as a crucial blueprint in trailing migratory routes and oral histories of the first Adi settlements. The river as a guiding agent in *The Black Hill* (2017) to direct Gimur’s destiny and the eminence of high mountain ranges standing as a barricade against the British invasion symbolizes the interdependent relationship of guidance and protection. Dai taps on the Adi folk philosophy of the river being alive, possessing a soul, a path through which the spirits of the ancestors travel. Contamination of the river is thus reflective of the end of cultural memory– “Our river must not be interrupted” (Dai, 2009, p. 45). This philosophy of ‘personification of nature’ and interdependency of land and human, charges most of her works. It finds relevance in the deepening awareness of the fragility of the earth’s ecology and its grave implications for human survival.

Korff Jens (2021) stresses specifically the importance of studying the aboriginal perspective/worldview relating to Land. In his article “Meaning of land to Aboriginal people”, he argues that the key difference in the relationships people share with the land is rooted in the treatment of land as a ‘source’, which according to him is found in the dependency of a non-indigenous to ‘live *off*’ the land (land as capital) and the interdependency of the aboriginals to ‘live *with*’ the land (land as being).

“The latter has a spiritual, physical, social and cultural connection... and a profound spiritual connection to land. Aboriginal law and spirituality are intertwined with the land, the people and creation, and this forms their culture and sovereignty” (para. 1,5).

Obstinately, the two opposing ideas of ‘interdependency’ vs ‘ownership’ have assimilated to form a crude territorial ethno-politics that serve as power politics over eco-centric indigeneity. The gradually shifting matrix of native ‘land ethics’ from eco-centric ontology to a neo-colonial capitalist niche for control and possession are of the few concerns that Dai portrays in her works, in a wrestle to strike a balance between Land as community vs Land as capital. “Tribal modified” (p.175) as expressed in Dai’s *Legends of Pensam*, points at the change in social order and practices that differ from traditional forms, especially one that relates to concerns of land-human interaction. Referring to the pan-Maori ethnification in Newzealand, Elizabeth Rata (1999), in “Theory of Neotribal Capitalism”, points at the various ways in which Maori natives attained legal ownership of land but consequently succumbed to its susceptible capitalization and commodification in strategic ways. Though different in terms of geo-political history, this susceptibility can be understood in the context of the indigenous lands in the Northeast India as well, particularly in the ongoing capitalization and commodification of tribal lands for resource extraction. The seemingly sustainable eco-political modules that aims to hybridize different land ontologies by merging indigenous land-based practices to settler based legal institutions – a situation argued by Burow (2018) as “conceiving of and relating to land, through their own practices and those created by settlers and settler-state institutions” (p.57) – is only begetting a

new set of class structure within the indigenous populace. The gradual development of neo-tribal capitalism, that benefits a select few, may be seen as the most violent shift in tribal land ethics. In the wake of the neo-capitalist propagations, as revealed by Binita Kakati (2021), there have been constant alterations to the landscape in the aftermath of the so-called developments:

the valley rang with the sound of explosions – to make new roads into the valley. As we sat listening to birdsong and people’s stories, the deafening explosion felt even louder in the knowledge that nature seems to exist only to be taken. (Kakat, 2021, para 13)

Critiquing the connection between domination of nature and domination of women, Roger King argues that “the failures of moral perception and thought that can be found in the human relation to nature are symptomatic of similar failures to be found in the relations between women and men” (King, 1991, p. 75). While Dai’s *The Legends of Pensam* traverses towards the agency of ‘change’, Kire actively engages in critiquing the liminalities in this transition. Often invoking gendered codes hidden within the narratives of tribal culture, especially those that deal with the integration of women and nature, tied to their “umbilical chords” (p. 88). Women’s body and the physical manifestation of nature continue to be a recurrent site of resistance to essentialized feminine biologism. This integration is manifested under the traits of procreation and nurture as feminine strength versus feminine ‘essentialism’. In *When the River Sleeps* (2014) Ville lingers in the comfort of Earth as “mother” (p. 102), “the forest” his “wife” while at the same time the Kirhupfumia stands as antithetical to the conventional notion of motherhood, destined to “never have children” (p. 147) and the “widow-women” (p. 101) guards the river “shouting curses on the two men” (p. 104) for violating the sleeping river. Kire, thus, challenges the notions of feminine essentialism and attempts to break down the essentialized connection of women and nature, affixed in feminine biologism of reproduction and nurture, de-aligning biology as the overseer of women’s lives but social relations (Beauvoir, 2011). Indigenous women’s writings, as also in the works of Dai, tussle against biologic instrumentality of women “like a fermented bean/ left to procreate” (Reena, 2021, p. 45) and the replicating capitalized treatment of nature as an instrumental resource than an inherent being. This idiomatic interconnection of women’s experience to nature and species has been infamously criticized as anti-feminist by feminist scholars, for further grounding the assumed subsidiary position of women and nature to men.

Questioning the pan-cultural tendencies of women’s association to nature, in her article “Is Female to Male as Nature is to Culture”, Sherry B. Ortner (1974) highlights three ideological categories/tendencies that strengthen the supposed connection of nature and women: 1. Woman’s physiology, seen as closer to nature, 2. Woman’s social role, seen as closer to nature, 3. Woman’s psyche, seen as closer to nature (p. 74-81). Ortner critiques this logic of culture” (p.76) that places women as subordinate to men due to their assumed closeness to nature. However, in the context of Native women’s experience, the association between nature and humans cannot be negated. Nativity is innately linked to land, and indigenous ontologies are derived from and for it. This focus is crucial to dissect as well as identify normative regulations governing indigenous experiences that need to be reevaluated, not with the see purpose of drawing a relationship between the two but to critique and understand its socio-cultural implications. In her photo-essay-poetry, “No Questions, No Comparisons”, Padu (2021) engages in this dialogue of dissimilarity in women’s experience through her inability to “compare myself with the women who have fought for equal rights and equal wages around the world” (p. 112), explaining women’s emancipatory

hurdles arising in different cultural expressions – “I am weighed in numbers of cattle rather than gold” (p. 114). This difference in cultural expression may or may not be a dividing factor in universal concerns about womanhood, but acknowledging indigenous women’s experience is essential to their liberation.

Indigenous Women’s writings echo the ethnopolitical and ecological questions that oust women’s participation in decision making. Karry Padu’s (2021) “I am Property, A Photo essay”, published in Dai’s edited anthology *The Inheritance of Words* raises questions relevant to Galo women’s political and domestic experience. As it is scarce for women to participate in the public sphere of decision-making, it questions women’s involvement in their “rights under the guidance of a man” (p. 108). Padu confesses her existential ethos on being a “tribal woman” that binds her to “customs and tales of the ancestors” and her expected demeanor as a Galo woman, a “daughter” that “belongs to this land... (who is) its property!” (p.109). This question of ‘belonging to the land as a property’ may take us back to the initial reference made to Leopold’s (1949) criticism of Odysseus who “hanged all on one rope a dozen slave-girls...The girls were property, the disposal of property was then, as now, a matter of expediency, not of right and wrong” (p. 201). The locus of Leopold’s argument is in understanding the expediency of human ethics that he argues should begin to extend its ethical periphery to nature. The viability of this reference strikes the most important question, particularly, in the wake of hybridized tribal nationalism, as to how far has women’s identification with land been altered, both in terms of subjectivity and instrumentality. It taps on the inflexibility of tribal hybridized movement, that seems to be melding the best of both worlds – sustainability of indigenous episteme to the progressiveness of transnationalism yet fails to recognize how indigenous women’s emancipatory issues have been placed at the bottom of the various political expediences of power and policies of land ownership.

One cannot trace to segregate how social narratives of gendered socio-political dynamics came to existence in indigenous communities. Whether colonial capitalism continues to penetrate tribal ethno-politics or has cultural narratives inherently sanctioned men to be leaders and women, like nature, compliant followers. Both Dai and Kire unceasingly borrow from folk narratives and customs to critique these gender relations, synthesizing cultural histories to critique “The laws of birth, life and death ...fixed and unchangeable” (Dai, 2006, p. 77). Traditional narratives navigating women’s rendition are thus embedded in archetypal evidence (universal symbols) as a means of identity construction and are redefined for a rational identification with the modern world.

In *Gender and Folk Narratives: Theory and Practice* (2013), Neelakshi Goswami talks about three areas of concern in the folkloristic literature; firstly, how women have been portrayed, the second one relates to the questions of women’s aesthetics and the third involves how women have been recognized as artists. Folk narratives connected to the heroic tales of clan-heads revolve around legends of warriors who sacrificed their lives for the protection of their clan. These heroes were projected as symbols of protection, bravery, and authority. The feminine traits, however, projected in the tales of goddesses and fairies as deities of harvest, are symbolic of fertility and prosperity. On cultural identity, philosopher William James argues that identity comprises two modes of thoughts—the ‘paradigmatic mode’ (present) and the ‘narrative mode’. And narratives as ‘modes’ constructing identities “provides models of the world” (qtd.in Burner, 1986, p. 25).

Archetypal male figures have often been projected as protectors with the burden of social relations and welfare. In Dai's *The Black Hill* (2017) this accounts for the public and political participation of Kajinsha and the male heads of other tribes in their fight against the British to protect their land, while Gimur is found to have been actively involved in settling the trajectories of her private life, as her quest being more domestic than political. Kajinsha becomes a martyr of the clan and Gimur's misery is manifested through the loss of a child and spouse. The matter of concern here is to understand the public-private dichotomy and the traits of bravery and fertility attached to the concerned 'subjects'. Evidently, the narratives surrounding gender can control resultant 'gender performativity', but more importantly, what remains implicit is the interplay of absent narratives in shaping the symbol of the 'female subject'. Commenting on the importance of "the public/private debate" as an important trajectory of feminist folklore, Margaret Mill argues that "Women genres can be less public and dramatic and hence less visible compared to male genres...especially personal experiences narratives, tend to flourish in the private domain" (qtd. in Goswami, 2013, p. 7). The lack of ethnographic narratives that would articulate the possibility of juxtaposing traits of bravery, protection, or public participation to 'female subject', makes it nearly impossible for Gimur to be projected as equal to Kajinsha in the public arrangement. What governs Gimur's character is not evident in what was present in an ancestral past but in the absences and lapses in feminine representation that continue to control and govern the 'feminine subject'. The "subject" of gender as sites of inquiry ignites numerous questions pertaining to identifying what the subjects signify. "The idea of 'process' or 'becoming'" (Salih, 2007, p. 3) is significantly crucial in understanding subject formation which situates key importance on history to recognize the synthesizers that regulate it (Butler, 2006). Dai's writings investigate how elements of culture operate and regulate the functioning of the social structure.

The significance of narratives in identity formation as asserted by Burner, is in understanding how "human being achieves (or realizes) the ability not only to mark what is culturally canonical but to account for deviations that can be incorporated in narratives" (Burner, 1987, p. 68). This deviation, found in the critique of fixed cultural edifices, forms an important agency in Indigenous Women's Writings. The emancipation of 'self' combines elements of cultural memory, and socio-political resistance while attempting to identify the codified cultural fetters. This posits, as mentioned earlier, the urgency to theorize a native-feminist discourse that acknowledges 'experiences' shaped in lieu of traditional ontologies. Indigenous women's emancipation can only be achieved by rethinking 'community'. To rethink the gendered connection to the land and the indigene towards formulating a tribal nationalism, can effectively mark the possibility of distancing from the western notion of tribal sovereignty. This would require building on the "native philosophical concept" of interdependency, as argued by Ramirez, "rather than creating a hierarchy between the group and individual rights, that a respectful interchange between the two can be established" (2007, p. 31).

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