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Interview

Critical Dialogue with Mamang Dai

In conversation with Jyotirmoy Prodhani[1] & Urvashi Kuhad[2]

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JYOTIRMOY PRODHANI (JP): We have amidst us one of the most versatile and charismatic writers from the Northeast known for her deeply nuanced poems and lyrical stories. She is one of the first and the finest writers writing in English from India's Northeast. Born in Pasighat in Arunachal Pradesh, she did her schooling in Pine Mount, Shillong (Meghalaya) and did her graduation from Gauhati University. From Arunachal Pradesh, described as the 'land of the rising sun', she was the first woman from her state to become an IAS in 1979, the coveted civil service position in India. But she would leave the job to dedicate herself fully to her passion —writing. She had also worked for the major national dailies like *The Hindustan Times, The Telegraph, The Sentinel* and others. Recipient of one of the highest civilian awards of India, Padmashree in 2011, her first major work of fiction, *The Legends of Pensam* published in 2006 made an audacious entry into the world of letters where the unique way of telling stories would come to be known in the academy as the quintessential literary discourse from Northeast. Her novel *The Black* Hill (2014) where history, myths and memories merge into a narrative totality got her the prestigious Sahitya

Akademi award in 2017, the first from Northeast to get the award for an English novel. Earlier Dr Temsula Ao got the award in 2013 for her collection of English short stories, *Laburnum for My Head* (2009). Mamang Dai has also received the Verrier Elwin award (2013) for her book *Arunachal Pradesh: The Hidden Land.* She is a poet, a novelist, and also a folklorist. Her collections of poetry include *River Poems* and *Midsummer Survival Lyrics* (2014) and also the novel *Stupid Cupid* (2008) as well her other works like *Mountain Harvest* on the food of Arunachal Pradesh, *Hambreelmai's Loom, The Sky Queen, Once Upon a Moon time* are collections of folklore for the young readers. She has recently edited a collection of women's writings from Arunachal Pradesh: *Inheritance of Words.*

The magical lyricism is one of the hallmarks of her abiding prose. Pensam, the place in between, is described by her as "the small world where anything can happen and everything can be lived. With the narrow boat that we call life sails along somehow in calm or stormy weather where the life of man can be measured in the span of a song." For her "all that matters is love and that memory gives life, and life never ends."

We welcome Mamang Dai, to this session of Critical Dialogue as part of the second Rupkatha International Online Conference. Also, I welcome my co-host, Urvashi Kuhad to the session. Welcome Madam!

Mamang Dai (MD): Thank you so much, Professor Jyotirmoy Prodhani. You have been very very kind in your introduction. So, I was looking forward to this chat and hearing from you giving me such a kind introduction and putting so much attention to what you were saying, I really feel quite humbled. So, thank you Rupkatha, thank you also Dr Urvashi for being with us. Really! I don't know where to start. I think Prof Jyotirmoy had said…

Jyotirmoy Prodhani (JP): Let's begin with a small sort of a query just to get the ball rolling. In the history of Northeast fiction in English, of course we can take the name of Temsula Ao as one of the pioneers of Northeast fiction in English, especially her books, *These Hill Called Home, Laburnum for my Head*. She is an important name. However, *Legends of Pensam* is a landmark achievement not only for you as a writer but also for the whole idea of Northeast fiction in English as a whole, for this happens to be one of the most significant works which characterize as typical Northeast story in terms of its unique narrative style, landscape it has depicted and the ethical worldview it is delineated. How did this whole idea of Pensam come to your mind and how did you plan this book, especially the structure of the work? It is quite unique in fact.

MD: Actually, Pensam started, you know, through a kind of journalistic notes. You must remember I was also a journalist at that time. And I have always been interested in the concept of myth, memory, time, myth, memory, meaning. 'What is meaning? myth, memory or imagination?' 'Is imagination greater than knowledge?' You know, when you listen to some of the stories, which I was hearing firsthand, it's unique, you have to pay a lot of attention and you have to pay a lot time. So, coming back after so many years of having been abroad and then rediscovering the land and the people (and also their stories). So, I was always interested in stories and I have my mother tongue this became like my journalistic notes. We have something called the *Abang*, this is the classical Adi literature, I am talking about the Adi tribe, which is the tribe I belong to in the Siang valley in the Pasighat area; so, the Abang I found was really fascinating, because it has all the aspirations, the spiritual longings, in the life of man and what it means to be a human person.

Now the Abang is quite complex because in every Abang there are several Abangs and this is the epic narrative and every Abang begins with the same kind of introduction, let's say a prelude, starting from the beginning which was very dark, and it's like the creation myths and then it branches out. After that, the person who is reciting, the performer, who is the shaman, can take any of the branches of the big tree as it were. So, these stories fascinated me, and I found the whole world-view of people. If you are travelling in Arunachal Pradesh and you speak the language and you can really enter villages and sit with people, you can ask them about the forest, jungle lore, superstitions and we'll find they always speak about the land in a kind of hesitant, cautious way and not as if they are trying to promote something which they think you might be interested in listening to. It's as if they are talking about some relatives, quietly and calmly. So, this was the basis of all my notes. That's how the structure of the book came to my mind, set itself and then I had a little problem with the narrative, chronological the chronology not being linear, etc. style, because my publishers and editors also were saying this was waving back and forth, you know, but that's the way I like to deal with time and memory.

Urvashi Kuhad (UK): Those are very very interesting thoughts Ma'am, and I have been holding a question inside me for a while and this is also an area of research that I have undertaken after coming across a couple of writers from the Northeast. I am teaching a paper on Indian Writing in English which has poetry from Robin Singh Ngangom. But Ma'am when you say you belong to the Adi tribe and you talked about classical Adi literature, how relevant do you think it is to keep our oral tradition alive? I am talking about folk literature, folk narrative and to what extent have these influenced your style of writing or the themes of your writing?

MD: I think the oral tradition because it's so open to interpretation, even in one village we have various sub-clans, so they will be narrating it in a slightly different way. But the thread of the story, what I was saying this big tree, we all know the stories, so, that kind of gives us our sense of community and thereby our sense of identity in one form or the other and that binds us together. Oh, you know this story of how the goat got its horns? So, this is the folk culture that was transmitted orally. Now, of course, so many things are changing. I often think about an ecological term they use that - the predicament of the 'place 'faithful,' see if you are going to save the tiger, for example, but the habitat is lost it is going to be a really uphill battle. Similarly, it's something like that with our traditions. If you are losing habitat or the place is changing so much, people are travelling out, so all the things, that that becomes something to consider. Nevertheless, I think because we are doing this translation, and appropriating the myths and putting them into print, a kind of transcription work that is going on, I think that is important because they hold a lot of ethical views as well, which I think, are important for us. Personally, for me, I find great consolation. Professor Jyotirmoy was reading about the word *Pensam* and what it means, the last line, 'where the life of a man can be measured in the span of a song', that is my interpretation of one of the portions of Abang. There is something called *pengey* which is an elegy; when a person dies, you can call a special shaman to perform this song, it is sung all night, and the person has to be well-versed in the life of the deceased and he starts on this very long journey recounting, 'Do you remember that place where your mother gave you that packet of rice?' And they are travelling, travelling through all the childhood memories, and they are travelling up towards that destination where they have to part. And the singer will leave the person there, the soul of the person there and say, 'You take care and we will be on our way, and you'll be counted, and all your friends

know where you are going.' And then he takes the form of a bird, a hawk, and flies back in case the soul tries to follow him and that kind of thing. But I think the concept, the imagination is quite beautiful, even though it was only orally chanted.

JP: Madam, when it comes to narrative, what we call the Northeastern literary narrative, though this is a fiction and, of course, we know fiction is a western import here, but what makes literature of Northeast (unique) is its whole mode of presentation which departs in a very significant way from other modes of writing happening in the same language in other parts of India. What do you think are the quintessential elements/ components that together compose the typical Northeast ethos in the writing from this particular region? Which might have also been in resonance in your writings as well.

MD: Northeast ethos…I think Prof Jyotirmoy is throwing such hard questions at me. But I think there's a sense of, with people at least I meet, especially in rural parts of Northeast, of being truthful. Great attention and great importance is given to being truthful. The truth matters and I think this also, if somewhere along the way, when you are writing, you kind of discover a more authentic part of yourself then I think this gives it a kind of the ethical view. Because, if you're truthful and we have the worship of the sun and moon, not exactly the worship, but the belief of sun and moon, so this has also to do with the idea of justice, with being true to yourself. We have a saying in Adi which says 'agii a:pii em gesilangka,' which means, 'Please (delete 'please') 'wear your own heart. Don't try to be something you are not.' And I think in the present many writers in the Northeast are trying to take this body of lost or forgotten histories, bringing it out but with a degree of being authentic.

JP: Madam, in the famous novel *The Black Hill* for which you have received the Sahitya Akademi Award, history is one of the focal points there which is one a major inspiration for this work of fiction but also you've used the mythologies, the memories that you have spoken about, and also ecology. How do you allow these elements to converge into the totality of a narrative? What is your treatment of history from the perspective of a native position?

MD: When I started *The Black Hill,* I stumbled upon it by chance. The story of Father Nicolas Krick because I was doing research for another work. Then I found someone called Father Krick had come up to this village, not very far from Pasighat which is my hometown, so I tried to find out a bit more and it was not easy because people remembered the British when they had come up in the early 19th century but nobody seemed to remember Father Krick. He had been there for five days and the report of his stay at that time was in the Calcutta Archives (which was published in the journal of the Asiatic Society of Bengal). So, I got that translated version into English by Father Rev. A Gille.

Then that's how the story began. I could kind of see this image of this young priest, you know, striding through the forest and then suddenly emerging. He was so keen on his mission to Tibet. He wasn't looking for Arunachal or convert here but he was on his route to Tibet. And that's how things happened but I felt history actually is a meeting place, there are so many possibilities that we don't really know what happened. Even in *The Black Hill* the character of Gimur, right at the end I had put, *'they didn't know what the history books would say about them,'* maybe so and so died in the village war and she herself disappeared from history. So that was my way of being authentic, because Gimur is just a fictional character, the priest is true, the tribal chief is true but

Gimur was just there as a narrator but I thought I should put in some truth and say she no longer exists. So that was my way of being a little bit true to possibilities. Maybe there was such a person, who knows, but at this point, I had just created her. And I was also interested in the nature of spirituality. I felt if the priest and the tribal chief could have interacted for a bit more time, if things had been a little bit different, because he was beginning to see also that ultimately it was not about conversion or preaching, it was just speaking the language of the hearts. And the life they believed in, what they believed and that gives them the reason for being honoured, that gives their life's meaning. So that the kind of thing I was trying to propose.

JP: You also brought in lot of memories, mythologies, the creation of the character against a historical backdrop which is a real story. Did you have some hesitations so as to deal with (them), how you negotiate with the possible contour of it?

MD: I did think because a priest coming from a the Paris foreign missions NB- Paris Foreign Missions, and a French Jesuit priest, I can't make him think and feel, you know, the way I wanted someone to think and feel because he knows his theology, he was an ordained priest, he was giving mass. I delved into the history of Jesuits, Ignatius Loyola, then I dragged my parents even on a trip from Guwahati to Shillong to the Don Bosco Mission there, I went to a Jesuit house in Guwahati but nobody knew very much about Father Krick. It was the time of martyrs, when the far east was far more important. People were being killed in Japan. Recently all kinds of films were also made about that period. Father Krick and his assistant Father Augustin Bourry both of them were just struggling on. I can't imagine how they travelled from Guwahati, right up on elephant, on boat, on foot, you know. I thought it was really quite remarkable the passion these people had. Even now it was easier for me to go to Paris, to the foreign Missions, rather than to go where Father Krick had been on foot in my own home state in Anjaw district, because there was a landslide, I had to wait for the right time, then I had to enlist the help of the local politicians to give me a car and some help. The language is also different there, from that of Adi. So that kind of thing. I was careful to look at his notes and some things I imagined what he might have felt from the little things he left. He was an anthropologist actually, he became fascinated with the forest, the swing rope bridge, the Tibetan beads, prayer wheels and so that was how the book was written. And then when I actually went to that spot and met with people some village elders remembered from his father's father that 'Oh, yes!'. I said, 'Did no one claim Kajinsha's body, the Mishmi Chief?' I went to Dibrugarh jail also to look up how he might have had felt there, so suffocated after having lived so openly in the mountains. The first tribal man maybe to be hung in the Dibrugarh jail. What rage, what frustration he might have felt but this man told me, 'No, how could we go? How would anyone go to claim his body?' At that time, it was impossible but still, I made Gimur to go (smiling) and do a few things in the prison because there is a record in the British Archives in the history books that two guards were killed and the French foreign Missions had pleaded for mercy, for the killer, but they had hung him because of the death of the prison guard. So, one of the prison guards I made Gimur kill and that was how this story went.

JP: We have a little bit of time left. Before that Urvashi might be having a question, but I would like to know, that many of the audience here would also like to know that, your location, that is Arunachal Pradesh, when it comes to the pan-Indian imagination of this particular place, there seems to be a geographic duality. In our imagination, it is the frontier but it is also geographically the first place in India where the sun rises the first, i.e., in your place. So from that place, you are

the beginning but for the (so-called) mainstream, you are the ending, sort of, that is the paradox of this location. How do you look at your own place from the point of view of the mainstream back to your own place and how it might have had reflected in your writings as well?

MD: About my writings, Professor, I don't know, it's just that okay I am here and these are the stories or I was able to transcribe them or set them into a different alphabet or language. But...

UK: Ma'am I wanted to ask you about women characters, the women that are present in your tales. What I observed is that women occupied central spaces in your tales and how do you see their sense of construction, their expressions basically? You also, through these women, these characters, you also at a point have often tried to make a subtle critique of both the native tribal society as well as the typical patriarchal and racial urban mainland. So how do you see these two kinds of womanhood, a kind of paradox that comes up? On one hand, the woman emerging or present rather in the native tribal society as well as women who are part of the urban mainland and how they assert themselves in society?

MD: I think I have always felt women are the more enduring. Throughout history we have seen there are a lot of wild, wonderful, warrior women, right from Biblical times or Cleopatra, Dido, Queen of Carthage, the Amazons, even in the Ramayana and Mahabharata, things like that. But I have a close connection with my sisters, cousins, kith and kin, so I find them the most fascinating to look at womanhood who do things, who endure, who fulfill obligations, who want more but can still laugh about not having it. That is a kind of lesson. You don't always have to be in the forefront for rights. You can take it any time you want in your own little circle. And we have a patriarchal society and it is very tough on child marriage, forced marriage. But things are changing. But within that context, if you take womanhood, what it means to be a woman, I think a lot of women are happy also. If the men in the villages are in a similar situation when both are leaning on each other. So, that's how I look at it. I think, maybe there is not so much need to come and talk so much about women's rights where it is not in that environment where they can acquire or have it. But I think women are much more flexible, and resilient.

Reactions from audience:

John R. Baker (JRB): yes, Ma'am. I was very impressed, very, very heartfelt impressed. Listening to you talk about this area, I didn't know about this area in your part of the world. It just impressed me in very very solid ways. I have some background in epic literatures, strong women characters are there in that literary tradition. Forgive me if this is off-topic and not connected, bu I'm curious. Do you see any connections between the older epic literature and the type of oral tradition, and the oral tradition of the epic literature (the oral retelling of our earliest epic works) that was eventually written down and the oral retelling that you have explained today and where it's going? Do you see any connections here? Any similarities, any differences? The Green Knight, Homer and the Iliad.

MD: I think that's the great adventure of epic narratives. We are lucky the whole world has these stories. Look at the Icelandic sagas, we are all watching them. They've been made into films. Even when I saw *Avatar*, I thought this could be one of our stories; this huge big tree we worship, you know that kind of thing. So in the retelling maybe it even evolves, but what is the core of that

story, I think, that stays. In the end, we have to win maybe but at what cost? And we have to look at the environment around us; we may need wolves to help us, maybe a polar bear will come out of snow, so that kind of thing. So I think that is very fascinating, that is the wonderment of living, seeing this continuity of human life and all other lives.

JRB: Thank you so much, Ma'am.

MD: Thank you, John.

UK: There is a question in the chatbox where it says, an anonymous id. He or she wants to know the category of Northeast writing. Is there something that commonly ties writers from the Northeast or how do we categorize Northeast writing? Is it a permissible category? Or is it narrowing down of the categories way too much to call everything as Northeast literature?

MD: Thank you for your question. I think we have reached this point Dr Kuhad, Professor Jyotirmoy was also talking about Arunachal at the edge, kind of liminal space or what is beyond. At the moment, at least among my friends, the writers, the Northeast Writers Forum, we know we share the geographical affinities of the area. And because it is quite new, the writings coming out in English altogether so, there will be similarities of land, the landscape but I think this is going to change or it will change because another generation of writers will see things differently. Already people are writing about so many other things. Even just the simple image of a rain cloud or mist on your shoulder that is becoming almost like a science fiction. So, we don't know where it will go; but that is fine also, it goes where it will. It .depends on the feeling of the author and being aware of what you are trying to do, because writing, after all, is the juxtaposition of what you are and what you're trying to say, what you feel, what you want to share. You want to be left alone but there is something you want to share so that the other person comes in. But I am not like this with my relatives, let's say, I am totally different as a writer and as a person talking to them. But they are patient with me. That is how things happen. But I think in the future there will be other writings. The land is not here for us to promote, delineate with lot of romance or love all the time. Things will change and there will be other stories, I think.

JP: Just to have a cue from Mamang Dai about Northeast. Northeast as a terminology is not accidental. It has come from a historical terrain, historical trajectories, geo-ethnic factors involved. Northeast also is an official terminology in our Constitution and besides, because of Northeast we have rather become visible. Literature of every state is there, like Manipur literature is there which is very rich, Assamese literature is there, very rich, Tripura, they have their literature. But Northeast as a kind of common platform for creative expression has happened in a very big way and in a very significant way which has helped our writers, our voices to be heard as a collective entity. It has really helped to gain visibility all across. It has helped us to gain the kind of attentions that we wanted to draw. Otherwise, we have disparate literary traditions, Assamese writing tradition, Manipuri writing tradition. But when it comes to the Northeast then it becomes a formidable body of literary articulations. Is there any other questions?

UK: Ma'sm ahs been so patient and kind throughout. Thanks you Ma'am. To put in between, you mentioned a couple of key words which got me so alert. You talked about folk culture and folk studies. I am working on that and it really interests me. In fact science fiction is one of my areas of work. My PhD is on Indian science fiction and that intrigues me. It was so nice to hear from you

even though you are talking about classical literature. Of course, you talked about a lot many things, but there is an all-rounded view which inspires people like me, you know I am in the academic field and I teach and this enthuses me with more confidence and energy to be working more on such ideas.

JP: Thanks to Mamang Mai Madam for being here, thanks to Tarun Tapas for having facilitated the session. We are concluding the session. Thank you so much for being here. Hope you are here for longer sessions as well.

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