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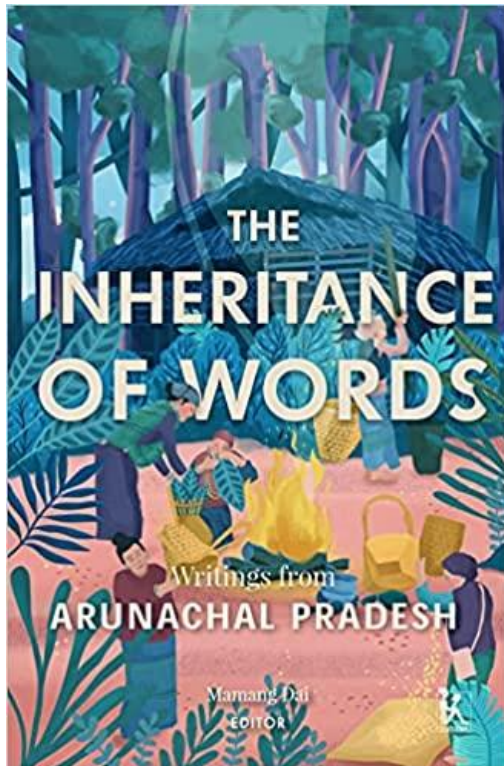
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Book Review

***The Inheritance of Words: Writing from Arunachal Pradesh* by Mamang Dai (ed.)**

Publishers: Zubaan. Date of Publication: 2021. Language: English. Number of pages: 186. Price: Rs 495/- \$20. ISBN No. 978 81 94760 53 5



Reviewed by

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Mamang Dai, one of the most eminent literary voices from Northeast India, compiles a unique collection of writings and creative expressions exclusively by women authors and artists from Arunachal Pradesh. The collection, aptly titled *Inheritance of Words*, includes short fiction, poetry, essays, artworks, and graphic narratives by women belonging to various ethnic communities of Arunachal Pradesh which is home to many indigenous tribes like Adi, Apataini, Galo, Nyishi, Monpa, Mishmi, Aka and so on. Some of the authors included are well-known and a number of them are quite young, still struggling with the trepidation to bring out their first volume. The rich and diverse land of Arunachal is also a land of many indigenous languages which are primarily oral but vibrant and at the same time, some of them stare at the steady shrinking and receding of

their languages. As Yater Nyokir points out in an essay of the book, there are 25 tribes and 90 languages spoken in Arunachal. Nyokir also points out that despite such plurality, there is one 'common feature', that is they are 'great storytellers' (p.158). The orality of the indigenous language has provided deeper and intense linkages with their folkways and native mores and, in a very significant way, it is the ethereal nuances of sounds of their words, and not necessarily the visuals of the graphemes as in the case of the written languages, are what the communities have inherited as part of their cultural heirloom; hence this is an 'inheritance of words'. In the absence of a written script, the literary writing from Arunachal, in its early years, used to be primarily in Assamese, which used to be the lingua franca following long geo-historical proximities between Assam and the northern valleys, the territory which the colonial administrators described as the North East Frontier Agency (NEFA) and later became Arunachal Pradesh. Two of the famous writers emerged from Arunachal telling the tales of their land and people are Lummer Dai and Yeshe Dorjee Thongshi who used to write in Assamese and have won several prestigious literary awards and honours. Later, this frontier state produced some of the most powerful authors who have chosen English as the preferred language of their literary expressions. Sahitya Akademi award-winning author Mamang Dai is the most prominent among them. Hindi is relatively a recent phenomenon in the state when the Indian government initiated the move to spread the language in a frontier state of the country apparently to bring the region closer to the mainland. A number of authors have come up now who write in this newly introduced language. In her introduction, Mamang Dai writes, "This is a story of story, one of many to explain the absence of a script among the Arunachal tribes" (p. 1). She describes the book as the "first of its kind because it brings together the diverse voices of Arunachali women writing in English and Hindi" (p.2). Though the authors belong to various tribal categories, with indigenous languages of their own, their writing in English and Hindi, two of the acquired languages, quite efficiently represent the native cultural realities.

The diversity of their ethnic identities has not necessarily made the writings effectively distant from each other, rather there are resonances of similarities in their writings and expressions. The poems included are by poets belonging to various tribal identities, yet they reflect similar emotive nuances and intensity. There are celebrations and disquiets of womanhood and at the same time, the poems also go beyond the limits of gender boundaries to peek into the psychic realms of men as well. The first poem of the volume, "A Man I Know" by Samy Moyong speaks of a man's efforts to conceal his heart amidst sorrows:

He puts on a mask when asked of his day
 And talks of everything but himself
 He calls himself evil but acts like a human
 Confusing himself and all others. (p. 12)

Her next poem, "I Am", is a bold assertion of a woman against turmoil and brutal repression that she resists with powerful idioms:

Before you dismiss me as a mere being
 Someone you could trample crush and kill

I just want you to know
 That I was a candle in the woods
 Burning bright in an aura of my own. (p. 13)

Moyong asserts to turn her body into a site of amorous freedom as well as into a badge of preservation, "When all you can think of is about the pleasure/ Of that extended flesh hanging between your thighs/ I wish the vagina could bite" (p. 15)

While speaking about the body, Toril Moi writes, "The body is at once what we are and the medium through which we are able to have a world" (p.5). Moi refers to Simone de Beauvoir where she rejects the Cartesian 'body/ mind split' (p. 4). Tolum Chumchum positions herself beyond this range of Cartesian solipsism and speaks of her body to unravel it as a site of her unabashed self by enunciating the affinities between her femininity and her biological body. Therefore, in her poem, "The Darkest 5 days", she candidly confides in one of the intimate pains that she suffers every month following menstruation. Both the physical discomfort and the social taboos make those five '5 days' more poignant and acute:

There you show up again redhead huh?
 Blossoming on my sheets
 Like a barrel of red wine
 Between my leg

 My stomach bloats
 My head throbs
 My limbs ache
 The cry of my body
 Like a cooking show going, on my belly (p. 89)

Doirangsi Kri's "Little Life" presents the joy of childbirth which is universal and personal at the same time, uniquely experienced only by a woman. Compared to this "Offspring" written by Ayinam Ering is rather a critique of the social expectation of at least one male child. There are short poems like Kolpi Dai's "Which Part of Me" that presents two contradictory images of universal womanhood — one introvert and the other extrovert. Long poems like Ngurang Reena's "My Ane's Tribal Love Affair" portrays the 'first wife' of a patriarch, who is pushed to the margins by her society. The poetic persona asks her 'Ane' (mother) after the death of her father to start thinking about herself and finding a partner to grow old together with, instead of cursing her 'God Donyi Polo' (p. 43).

The poems of Rebom Belo, Ponung Ering Angu, Nomi Maga Gumro, Omili Borang, Tunung Tabing are deeply personal, and reflective of the psychic state against specific junctures of moments haunted by the nostalgia for home, its 'hearth', customs and rituals, landscape and seasons. Such metaphors also recur in the poems of Jamuna Bini (translated from Hindi), Gyati T.M. Ampu,

Mishimbu Miri and Chasoom Bosai. As in H  l  n Cixous' Medusa ("The Laugh of Medusa"), from whose head snakes dangle symbolizing the different forms of the female self, the feminine images deflect off these scripted texts. They are vivid, self-assured, and yet bogged down by social codes.

Ayinam Ering's "I Am a Tree" is perhaps one of the most powerful eco-feminist poems ever written, the poem gains further significance and power since it is written by one whose authentic intimacy with nature is more immediate and deeper. She writes:

I am a tree
 I'm strong. I'm steady.
 So what if autumn turns my leaves yellow?
 So what if the assailant wind strips all my branches bare?
 I'm still alive from inside,
 and I possess the strength
 to spread greenery again. (p.43)

The prose pieces of this volume vary from tales to memoirs to critical essays. The essays, "Indigenous Tribal Languages of North East India: Strategies for Revitalization" by Toku Anu and "Linguistic Transitions" by Yaniam Chukhu express the concern at the growing disappearance of the indigenous languages of Arunachal Pradesh. Toku Anu expresses a premonition that the Bugu and Sherdukpen languages with just about 3000 speakers left might as well disappear soon with the last generation of speakers still holding on to it. Yaniam Chuku, a native Nyishi speaker, finds himself in an ironic situation when even to complete a Nyishi sentence she has to depend on English or Hindi as a 'desperate crutch' (p. 120). She also points out how the speakers of Hrusso Aka language are fast dwindling. A similar view is expressed in the story "The Spectre Dentist" by Millo Ankha where the protagonist ponders over the disharmony between the spatial and linguistic identity of an Arunachali. Ironically, this is one crucial issue that the book encounters as it itself is a compilation of writings in English and Hindi translated into English, though composed by the native Arunachalis having distinctive tribal languages of their own. Referring to Ng  g   wa Thing'o's concept of 'orature', Toku Anu has brought in a number of references to certain other linguists who insist on the importance of oral literature. Like Ng  g   wa Thing'o, they also feel that the imposition of non-native languages is hegemonic and detrimental to the native languages. Yaniam Chukhu laments, "Unlike Nagamese, an increasing number of families in Arunachal are resorting to this Arunachali Hindi over their mother tongue, even in private spaces. Amongst the young generation it has taken over as the preferred language over one's indigenous tongue even within the same community" (p. 125). However, Anu looks forward to the prospects of the newly developed Wancho script and hopes that the emergence of such new scripts would suit the languages and literature of different tribes of Arunachal. In a similar optimistic tone Yater Nyokir in her "Bards from Dawn-lit Mountains" gives an account of literature produced by the Arunachalis and underlines the importance of literature written by the Arunachali author in Assamese, English and now in Hindi which is, as she points out, is just a 20th century phenomenon with a handful of writers. But they have been able to draw great attention and recognition through awards and honours which speak of their 'versatility' (p. 162).

Orature has a strong presence in the narrative imagination of Arunachal Pradesh. Mishimbu Miri's memoir "Revelations from Idu Mishmi Hymns" narrates ancient lore of the Idu Mishmis that the author learnt from her father who was a shaman himself; so is in Tongam Rina's "The Interpreter of Dreams" which records the reminiscences of her grandmother who could interpret dreams. When Leki Thungon's "Doused Flames" refers to the sleepwalkers called Zekumus, Ing Perme's "A Ballad of the Adi Tribe" refers to the dirges and the world of the spirits. The closing text of the book, an interview ("The Summit") conducted by Mamang Dai with Tine Mena, the first woman from Arunachal Pradesh to have climbed Mount Everest, reflects the same kind of beliefs on the spirit world from the point of view of a mountaineer.

Significantly, the tales and the memoirs tend to present themes quite similar to those of the poems. "Night and I" presents very personal reflections of the author Nellie N. Manpoong when the question of feminism emerges through the stories of Ronnie Nido's "The Tina Ceiling" and Ponung Ering Angu's "Among the Voices in the Dark". While the need for a female space in the socio-political sphere is highlighted in "The Tina Ceiling"; the image of the oppressed womanhood crushed by the age-old patriarchal customs is poignantly depicted in "Among the Voices in the Dark". "The Spirit of the Forest" by Subi Taba tells the tale of how nature, in the form of thunder, avenges the perpetrators who had set the forest on fire in order to plunder the resources. This reminds one of similar wildfire caused by men that spread in the Amazon forests which generated huge concern over environmental sustainability throughout the world.

The artworks and the photographs featured in the book are an exquisite juxtaposition of art and written texts reminding one of the ancient Chinese poetry-paintings, the Medieval Persian miniatures, Japanese Haiga-Haiku combinations, as well as the arts of the Pre-Raphaelites, especially the intricate pencil works of Bahnu Tatak. Bhanu Tatak's art is a celebration of details that reflect the extraordinary mastery of the artist to confidently freak out with ink. "Home is This and Much More" is Stuti Mamen Lowang's collage of sketches that evocatively captures the oscillation between the warmth of hearths and the hopes for the familiar homes interspersed with the uncanny visitations of terror and violence. After a brief introduction to her sketches, "Tradition: An Illusion of Continuance", Rinchin Choden presents her artworks accompanied by commentaries on the intrusive challenges of modernity to the settled landscape of tradition.

The silver lining in the dark cloud of modernity. The mother, the home and the solace where we first learn about tradition. We need to respect her and learn from her about the outside world. Her warm embrace teaches us not to falter in the face of adversity. (Rinchin Choden, p. 27)

The photo essay of Karry Padu under the title, "I Am Property" critiques the concept of the patriarchal imperatives imposed on a woman to be a living mannequin of exotica to deck herself up with the material markers of tradition. Significantly, in the images where the woman figure is seen embellished with traditional costume and ornaments, her face is conspicuously outside the frame of the composition underlining the process of reducing a woman into an impersonal display unit where her individual self is redundant. This gets more evident from one of the accompanying verses that run as "When I was young, I had no idea how important it was to be a tribal woman.../ I am its daughter, this land owns me. / I am its property" (p.109).

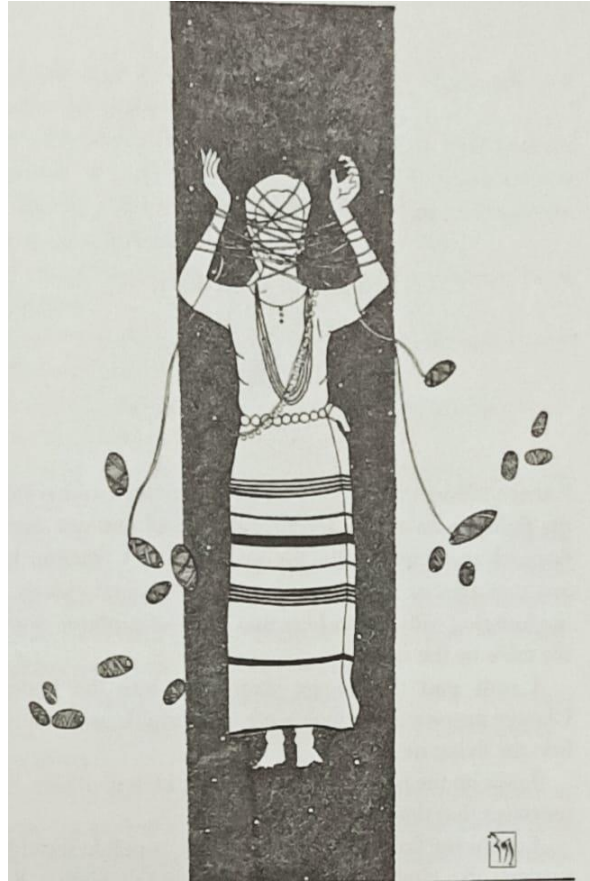


Figure 1: The Wrap

The book is unique in its structural planning which is a celebration of womanhood in totality as it is a collection of writings and art by women, edited by a woman, translators are women, and published by a publication house dedicated to providing the much-needed platform to the women who want their voices to be heard. The captivating editorial introduction by Mamang Dai is followed by the assorted texts, images, and notes on contributors and a glossary as the postscripts. The varied genres assume individual spaces but they reflect a thematic coherence letting the readers an assured transition from one genre to another exploring the plurality of the land flowing through the works of the women of Arunachal. Despite being by only women, the collection never devolves into tedious overlapping of perspectives. However, one limitation of the book might be the reticence in the 'Notes on the Contributors' section to provide the ethnic affiliations of the individual authors, which might well have been deliberate obfuscation on the part of the editor, nevertheless, one is sure that many might have this anthropological curiosity to know little more about the authors though, in a number of texts, the specific tribal identity of the writers is rather explicitly visible. However, Ponung Ering Angu's "Dying Lights" provides a metaphoric lead to summarise the collective longing of the poets who, against the certainty of changes aspire to nurture their belongings in the assured horizons of the past:

As the dawn breaks over and the darkness dies
Things are easy but nothing ever lasts

Oh the love, the strength and our enduring will
 Are struck somewhere in the walls of a past. (p. 33)

A book from Northeast featuring poems, essays, memoirs, art and photos all by women from one state, is the only one of its kind. Mamang Dai has made a historic contribution to have the women's writings from her state achieve a new level of distinctive visibility to reach out to readers not only across India but also all over the world. This is a book one must possess.

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