

From Indigenous Cosmology to Global Sustainability: Re-reading Mamang Dai through the Sustainable Development Goals

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Abstract

*Escalating climate change and loss of biodiversity and ecosystems are creating a stronger focus and commitment to the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) globally. In contrast to most contemporary environmental policies, there is a growing appreciation of the value of Indigenous ecological knowledge systems. Indigenous communities around the world, through their own cultural traditions, spiritual beliefs, and subsistence practices, historically maintained a balanced relationship with nature, developed an ecological harmony and environmental stewardship. In many instances, literary works arising from these contexts are carriers of important environmental information, knowledge, and sustainable world views. This paper aims to examine the ecological perspective of Mamang Dai in *The Sky Queen*, *Once Upon a Moontime*, *The Legends of Pensam*, and *The Black Hill*. Dai articulates the Indigenous cosmology of the Adi tribe of Arunachal Pradesh, and positions nature as a sacred, and active, presence that forms the core of the cultural identity, spiritual beliefs, and livelihood practices of the people.*

The main aim of the study is to examine how the narratives by Dai can express Indigenous environmental ethics and the role of these attitudes in the modern sustainability models in relation to SDGs. The research is especially interested in SDG 13 (Climate Action), SDG 15 (Life on Land), and SDG 12 (Responsible Consumption and Production) through the study of how the Indigenous ecological values that support environmental conservation, biodiversity protection, and sustainable management of resources. Literary works by Mamang Dai subvert the anthropocentric modes of development through an ecological version of the world where human beings exist in harmony with nature based on respect, reciprocity and balance.

The study is based on interdisciplinary approach to use Cultural Ecology, Functionalism, Cultural Materialism and Deep Ecology to explain the ecological aspects of the texts of Dai. The cultural Ecology is applied to examine the relationship that exists between the cultural practices of the Adi community and their natural environment. The functionalism assists in the understanding of how myths, rituals and oral traditions serve as mechanisms to maintain harmony in the ecological environment of the community. Cultural Materialism emphasizes the importance of subsistence lifestyles including shifting cultivation, hunting and river livelihood that are indicators of sustainable resource utilization and consciousness of the environment. The Deep Ecological philosophical framework adds another strong point to the analysis by highlighting the intrinsic worth of all life on the Earth and ecosystems that are not dependent on their economic usefulness.

As it is seen in the analysis, the works of Dai serve as the cultural preservation and ecological activism. In her stories, she describes sacred landscapes, forests, rivers and mountains as living things which are embedded deep in the Adi cosmological belief system. Harmony between humans and nature is represented by the Donyi-Polo spiritual philosophy worshipping the sun and the moon as the forces that guide people and ensuring an ethical duty towards the environment protection. Individual representations provide light to Indigenous ecological practices, which are effective in the conservation and sustainable life of biodiversity, which is well aligned with SDG 15 and SDG 13.

Moreover, this paper claims that the writings of Dai are critical of the ecological impacts of colonial intrusion, modernization as well as unsustainable development practices that break the conventional ecological balance. Indigenous knowledge systems and sacred relations with nature are foregrounded in her works, creating alternative approaches to environmental stewardship which have become relevant and appealing to modern sustainability models. These stories make it clear that environmental protection is not only a technological or economic issue, but a cultural and moral one.

These results indicate that the Indigenous literary narratives may add value to the sustainability discourse by providing culturally oriented interpretations of the environmental conservation and climate resilience. By incorporating this kind of ecological knowledge in the global sustainability plans, the policy frameworks can be strengthened, community-based conservation will be enhanced, and environmentally friendly development will be boosted. By her literary experience of the natural environment and culture, Mamang Dai offers a valuable

interdisciplinary insight into the Indigenous ecological experience and the global quest to sustainable futures.

Keywords: *Indigenous Ecology, Sustainable Development Goals, Cultural Ecology, Environmental Ethics*

Introduction

Climate change and environmental degradation are two of the biggest issues the world is currently facing. This includes issues such as global warming, biodiversity loss, deforestation, and environmental degradation. It becomes obvious that the world needs solutions that do not just concentrate on development and growth, but also consider the planet and its sustainability. This has led the United Nations to come up with the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs), which provide us with guidelines for the sustainability of the environment and the planet as a whole while ensuring the sustainability of human life as well. If you take a careful look at the SDGs, you will notice that some of the goals have been focused on saving the environment and the planet as a whole. These include the goal for climate change, the goal for life on land, and the goal for the responsible use of resources.

It should be noted that most of the current environmental policies have been based on the use of science and technology. However, the world has come to realize the importance of the Indigenous ecological knowledge that has been in existence for many years. This has been based on the traditions and spiritual beliefs that have been practiced for many years and have been part of the Indigenous way of life and the traditions that have been practiced for many years. To the Indigenous, the environment has been more than just a source of resources; rather, it has been something that should be respected and lived alongside.

This has been made possible through the Indigenous literature that has been in existence for many years. The myths and legends that have been practiced for many years have been more than just entertainment; rather, they have been the Indigenous way of describing the world and the philosophy that has been practiced for many years.

In India, Mamang Dai is one of the prominent voices for Indigenous Ecological Thinking. Her writings give life to the landscapes of Arunachal Pradesh and the traditions of

the Adi tribe in India. Her stories have many instances of the close association between human beings and the environment. She has also addressed the environmental issues that come along with development and change in the region.

This research paper analyses Dai's *The Sky Queen, Once Upon a Moontime, The Legends of Pensam, The Black Hill* to identify his eco-critical perspective as represented in his writings. The emphasis is on identifying his Indigenous cosmological representation through an interdisciplinary theoretical approach, to help determine how these literary representations contribute to current notions of sustainability and environmental ethics as discussed within the framework of current scholarship.

Indigenous Ecological Knowledge and Environmental Ethics

Indigenous ecological knowledge is a treasure trove of information gathered over countless generations. It is not just knowledge about the various species of plants and animals, it is a way of life, a way of living in harmony with the environment through the various stories, rituals, and beliefs that have been passed on to the community.

You will find a huge difference in the way the modern, industrialized society thinks compared to the Indigenous way of life. While the former seeks to progress economically, the latter seeks a balance in nature. Forests, rivers, animals, and the like are not just 'natural resources' to the Indigenous. They are sacred, part of a living cosmos. Hence, the community creates rituals to ensure harmony with nature, to ensure the judicious use of the resources provided by nature.

This is all part of their belief system, which is evident in the various stories they tell about nature, the various ways they interact with nature. This is the way they have managed to sustain their environment over the ages. It is a way of life that teaches moderation, no overuse of nature's gifts.

Now, more experts and policymakers realize the value of such a way of thinking. By reading Indigenous literature, we can even pick up ideas about the care of the environment and biodiversity that can help the world change to a more sustainable way of living.

Mamang Dai and the Representation of Indigenous Cosmology

The work of Mamang Dai is deeply rooted in the traditions of the Adi community. She does not just write about the landscapes of Arunachal Pradesh. She gives life to the landscapes she writes about. She draws on the power of memory, story, and oral traditions to give us a glimpse into a world where humanity and nature are intertwined.

For instance, in *The Legends of Pensam*, the rivers, mountains, and forests are not just there to provide a backdrop to the action. They are alive, influencing every aspect of the existence of humanity. In the work of Mamang Dai, we find a spirituality to life, a sense that humanity and nature breathe the same air.

In her other books, like *The Sky Queen* and *Once Upon a Moontime*, dive into the myths and folklore that teach cultural values. These aren't just tales for children; they're guides, offering lessons on how to act responsibly and care for the land.

Dai also explores the Donyi-Polo belief system, where the sun and moon are more than celestial bodies—they're the forces that keep order in the universe. By weaving these beliefs into her stories, Dai makes it clear: respecting and caring for nature isn't just sensible—it's sacred.

Theoretical Framework

A broad, interdisciplinary perspective is beneficial to better understand Dai's work—combining Cultural Ecology, Functionalism, Cultural Materialism, and Deep Ecology.

Cultural Ecology is a perspective that examines how culture and environment mutually influence one another. This perspective offers insight into how Adi culture and practices contribute to a healthy environment.

Functionalism is a perspective that examines how cultural practices contribute to social and environmental balance. Myths, rituals, and stories are not merely expressions of cultural ideas but also convey means to transmit ecological knowledge to future generations.

Cultural Materialism is a perspective that emphasizes subsistence practices such as shifting cultivation, fishing, hunting, etc. This perspective offers insight into how these practices contribute to a healthy environment.

Deep Ecology is a perspective that challenges a human-centered world. Dai's description of nature as sacred and alive reflects the fundamental principles of Deep Ecology.

Ecological Consciousness in Dai's Narratives

Mamang Dai's writing often brings life to the lands in her stories, where the forest, the river, and the mountain are not just the background settings for the story but the actual participants in the lives of the people in the story. The indigenous perspective that Mamang Dai promotes in her stories focuses on the idea that humans are closely intertwined with the environment and cannot be separated from it.

In many of the stories, the sacred lands play a crucial role in defining the character of the people in the story. The lands have the spirits of the ancestors and the presence of the sacred in them. By portraying the lands as sacred, Mamang Dai promotes the need for the preservation of these lands from destruction.

Mamang Dai's stories promote the idea of human ecology in the traditional sense. The traditional ways of farming and hunting and the use of resources promote the idea of sustainability that the indigenous communities of the Adi region have practiced for generations. The idea of ecology is not just theoretical in these stories; it has been made part of the lives of the indigenous communities.

There is always the need for balance between the needs of the human population and the needs of the environment in the stories that Mamang Dai promotes in her narratives.

Indigenous Ecology and the Sustainable Development Goals

Dai's works provide an ecological perspective that can be categorized as an important aspect of some of the Sustainable Development Goals.

Firstly, we have SDG 13: Climate Action. This is a call to address climate change and its impact on the environment. In Dai's works, we find lessons from indigenous ecological knowledge on how to live sustainably and build resilience in the environment.

Then we have SDG 15: Protect and Promote the Use of Land Ecosystems and Biodiversity. The vivid descriptions of Dai's works on forests and wildlife emphasize the importance of preserving natural habitats to achieve ecological balance.

Lastly, we have SDG 12: Responsible Consumption and Production. The traditional subsistence lifestyle depicted in Dai's works is a reflection of a resource management system that promotes sustainable use without overexploiting resources, as seen in the Adi lifestyle.

Critique of Modern Development

While celebrating Indigenous ecological practices, Dai's work also critiques the role of modernization and the impact of colonial invasion on the land. The construction of new roads, the expansion of industries, and the development of cities often disrupt the traditional ways of living.

The stories by Dai highlight the conflict between the traditional ecological practices of the Indigenous population and the new ideals of development. The invasion of the Indigenous land by the outsiders results in cultural disruption.

Dai's work brings to the fore the need to promote new ideals of development that respect Indigenous culture and ecology.

Literature as Ecological Activism

Mamang Dai proves that literature can play an important role in the field of ecological activism. The literature by the author preserves the important ecological practices of the Indigenous culture, which may otherwise go extinct.

The literature by Dai encourages the readers to think of the relationship between themselves and the natural world. The stories by the author promote the ideals of harmony with nature. The literature by Dai acts as an important tool to promote the ideals of ecology.

Conclusion

The current ecology crisis the world is facing can't be solved just by using technology. A change in the way we view and relate to one another as humans (culturally) and to the earth (ethically) is also required.

The Indigenous knowledge systems of the Adi people in India can show us a sustainable way of living with the earth and stewarding the environment, by providing examples of how they practice ecological consciousness from an Indigenous perspective through their oral history traditions. In her literature, Mamang Dai uses stories that portray the sacred relationship between humans and nature, emphasising balance, reciprocity, and respect for nature.

Combining these Indigenous perspectives with the Sustainable Development Goals, particularly climate action, biodiversity enrichment and responsible resource management, her literary work will make a significant contribution to the current conversation around sustainability.

Indigenous literary narratives are potentially a reservoir of ecological wisdom that can inform strategies for global environmental sustainability, forming the basis of a more integrated approach to sustainable development.

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