

Animating The Sacred: Mythic Ecologies And Indigenous Cosmology In Mamang Dai's The Legends Of Pensam, River Poems, And The Black Hill

Pankaj Gogoi¹, Popi Kalita², Dipankar Satola³

¹Assistant professor, Department of English, The Assam Royal Global University.

²Research Scholar, Department of English, Cotton University.

³Research Scholar, Department of English, Cotton University.

Abstract

This paper investigates the sustainable ecological practices of the Adi people of Arunachal Pradesh and examines their nuanced representation in the literary works of Mamang Dai, an acclaimed indigenous poet and novelist. Through an ecocritical lens that integrates indigenous epistemologies and ethnopoetics, this study highlights how Adi environmental ethics are deeply rooted in cultural memory, ritual, and reciprocal relationships with the natural world. Dai's narratives do more than depict nature—they animate landscapes as sentient entities embedded in myth, memory, and community life. Her literary corpus—particularly in works such as The Legends of Pensam and River Poems—functions as both poetic invocation and political intervention, articulating resistance to extractivist development models that threaten indigenous lands and lifeways. Central to this paper is the argument that Dai's work serves as a repository of endangered ecological knowledge systems while simultaneously proposing alternative visions of sustainability grounded in indigenous cosmology. By foregrounding the lived experiences of Adi women, elders, and storytellers, Dai contests dominant narratives of progress and modernization, offering instead a culturally embedded model of ecological resilience. Her use of mythic temporality, oral traditions, and non-Western narrative forms allows for a reimagining of sustainability not as a technological solution but as an ethical mode of being—rooted in relationality, reverence, and responsibility toward the Earth. This paper explores the texts The Legends of Pensam (2006), River Poems (2004) and The Black Hill (2014) to underscore the inseparability of ecology and culture in Adi lifeways and posits Mamang Dai's literature as a vital intervention in contemporary discourses on environmental justice and climate resilience, offering invaluable insights into more holistic and sustainable futures.

Keywords: *Adi, Ecology, Cosmology, Sustainability, Ecocriticism, Ethnopoetics.*

INTRODUCTION

The Adi people, one of the major indigenous tribal groups of Arunachal Pradesh in Northeast India, inhabit the highland and riverine areas of the Eastern Himalayas, a region noted for its ecological richness and cultural diversity. Historically, the Adi have maintained an intricate and dynamic relationship with their environment, characterized not by exploitation but by reciprocal stewardship. Their way of life demonstrates a deep-seated ethos of sustainability, encoded in their oral traditions, ritual practices, agricultural systems, and cosmological beliefs. This environmental ethos is more than a practical approach to resource use; it represents a holistic ontological framework in which all elements of the natural world—rivers, forests, animals, mountains—are imbued with spirit, agency, and relational value. In Adi worldview, human beings are not separate from nature but are one of many interconnected beings that co-inhabit a vibrant, sentient world. Sustainability, in this indigenous context, is not a modern policy prescription or a reactive strategy to environmental degradation. Rather, it is an ancestral wisdom that informs daily life, community values, and spiritual practices. As Berkes (2018) argues, traditional ecological knowledge is cumulative and adaptive, shaped by long-term observations and respectful interactions with nature. Among the Adi, this manifests in practices such as shifting cultivation (jhum), the veneration of sacred groves, seasonal hunting taboos, and the observance of festivals and rituals that honor ecological cycles. Each of these customs illustrates an embedded environmental consciousness and a collective ethic of balance and restraint. Mamang Dai, a celebrated literary figure from Arunachal Pradesh and a member of the Adi community, brings these ecological philosophies to the forefront of Indian English literature. A poet, novelist, and former civil servant, Dai's multifaceted work embodies the role of the indigenous intellectual—both a custodian of cultural

memory and a mediator between indigenous and modern worldviews. Her literary voice is uniquely positioned to communicate the nuanced relationships that the Adi people share with their landscape. Through works such as *The Legends of Pensam* (2006), *River Poems* (2004), and *The Black Hill* (2014), Dai articulates a vision of sustainability rooted in indigenous ontology, memory, and myth. These texts not only document but also perform indigenous environmental knowledge, blending narrative with ritual, and history with cosmology. In *The Legends of Pensam*, for instance, Dai crafts a nonlinear narrative structure that mirrors the cyclical temporality of Adi cosmology. The word 'Pensam', which means 'in-between', reflects both a geographical and a philosophical space—between past and present, between the living and the ancestral, between myth and history. Through this layered storytelling, Dai recovers indigenous epistemologies that have often been marginalized or misrepresented by colonial and postcolonial discourses. The novel contains a series of interconnected stories that revolve around forest spirits, ancestral interventions, and ecological transformations. These tales are not mere folklore; they are repositories of environmental memory, transmitting knowledge about sustainable practices, ecological boundaries, and communal values. Similarly, in *River Poems*, Dai's lyrical meditations on rivers, forests, and temporal loss serve as both elegy and testimony. Her poems evoke a deep spiritual connection to place, portraying rivers not as inert physical entities but as lifelines of cultural identity and spiritual continuity. The poems lament the erosion of landscapes, not just in ecological terms, but as a cultural crisis. By personifying rivers and imbuing them with emotion and voice, Dai reinserts indigenous subjectivity into environmental discourse—challenging dominant frameworks that treat nature as passive and exploitable. Her poetics elevate the river from a material resource to a cultural ancestor, echoing indigenous beliefs in the sentience and sacredness of natural forms. In *The Black Hill*, Dai returns to the colonial past to explore how external forces disrupted the harmonious relationship between people and their environments. The novel is set in the nineteenth century, during the early years of British exploration in the tribal frontiers. It narrates the encounter between local inhabitants and imperial agents, highlighting how colonial cartographies and extractive policies reconfigured landscapes into zones of conquest and resource accumulation. Through the character of Gimur, a tribal woman whose intimate knowledge of herbs, trails, and sacred spaces contrasts with the imperial logic of mapping and control, Dai reclaims indigenous agency and ecological wisdom. The novel implicitly critiques the epistemological violence of colonialism, which sought to overwrite indigenous ways of knowing and being in the world.

Collectively, these works function as an archive of indigenous sustainability—capturing the beliefs, rituals, and practices that sustain both the land and its people. But more than that, they serve as acts of resistance against epistemic erasure and ecological exploitation. In doing so, Dai aligns with what scholars such as Leanne Betasamosake Simpson and Linda Tuhiwai Smith describe as decolonial praxis—where storytelling becomes a mode of reclaiming land, identity, and future. This paper approaches Dai's work through the dual frameworks of indigenous ecocriticism and sustainability studies. Indigenous ecocriticism challenges the anthropocentric, Eurocentric, and universalist assumptions of mainstream environmental thought. It centers the voices and cosmologies of indigenous communities, who view nature not as an external object but as kin and co-creator (Adamson & Ruffin, 2013). This perspective emphasizes relationality, reciprocity, and respect as foundational ecological principles. Dai's writing exemplifies this framework through her insistence on place-based knowledge, oral traditions, and the spiritual vitality of the land. Sustainability studies, on the other hand, often operate within institutional, scientific, or policy-driven domains. However, recent scholarship has begun to acknowledge the value of traditional ecological knowledge and biocultural diversity in crafting sustainable futures (Maffi & Woodley, 2012). In this light, Dai's work offers a crucial bridge between indigenous sustainability and broader environmental discourse. Her literature communicates not only cultural narratives but also practical ecological wisdom—from food practices and forest management to ritual cycles and community governance. Moreover, this paper employs ethnopoetics as a methodological approach. Ethnopoetics involves reading indigenous literature not merely for content but as a form and practice embedded in oral, performative, and ritual traditions (Tedlock & Tedlock, 1975). Dai's literary form—marked by repetition, orality, nonlinear chronology, and mythic imagery—resonates with the ethnopoetic tradition. Her texts are not only about the environment; they enact an environmental consciousness through their very structure and rhythm.

Mamang Dai's literature, then, becomes a site of multiple convergences: literary art, cultural memory, ecological philosophy, and political critique. Her engagement with sustainable practices is not nostalgic but dynamic; she does not idealize the past, but rather reframes it as a repository of wisdom for imagining alternative futures. Her

narratives urge a rethinking of modern developmental paradigms that view nature as inert and indigenous knowledge as obsolete. In contrast, she posits a world where forests are teachers, rivers are ancestors, and sustainability is a way of life. This inquiry into the sustainable practices of the Adi people and their representations in Dai's literature is also situated within a broader geopolitical context. The Northeast region of India, including Arunachal Pradesh, has often been peripheral to mainstream Indian political, economic, and cultural discourses. It is marked by ethnic diversity, geopolitical sensitivity, and ecological vulnerability. In this context, Dai's work challenges both national and global narratives that marginalize indigenous voices. She reclaims space for Arunachal's landscapes and communities within the literary and ecological imagination of the nation. Furthermore, the Adi experience must be understood within the history of colonialism, state development, and ongoing environmental conflicts. Infrastructure projects such as dams, highways, and logging have altered the ecological fabric of the region. These transformations threaten not only biodiversity but also the knowledge systems and livelihoods of indigenous communities. By re-inscribing Adi environmental consciousness into literature, Dai provides a counter-narrative to this developmentalist agenda. In conclusion, the Adi people's ecological worldview offers a profound model of sustainable living—one that recognizes the interdependence of human and non-human life, the cyclical rhythms of time, and the sacredness of land. Mamang Dai's literary work becomes a vital site where these philosophies are remembered, reimagined, and reclaimed. Through an intricate weaving of myth, memory, and narrative, Dai contributes to an indigenous ecology of literature—one that speaks to the urgency of our ecological moment while grounded in ancestral continuity. This paper seeks to explore and analyse these contributions, drawing attention to the relevance of indigenous sustainability and the power of literary storytelling as a tool for ecological consciousness and cultural resilience.

INDIGENOUS SUSTAINABILITY AND THE ADI ECOLOGICAL ETHOS

The Adi people of Arunachal Pradesh embody a worldview that is fundamentally different from the mechanistic and exploitative paradigms often found in Western ecological thought. Rather than viewing nature as an inert backdrop or a commodity for human use, the Adi people perceive the environment as a living system comprised of interrelated entities—rivers, trees, mountains, animals, and spirits. This holistic and relational approach defines their environmental philosophy and underpins their sustainable practices. It also forms the ontological basis of their interactions with the natural world, rooted in reverence, reciprocity, and mutual care. Indigenous ecological knowledge, also referred to as traditional ecological knowledge (TEK), is central to this understanding. According to Berkes (2018), IEK is “a cumulative body of knowledge, practice, and belief, evolving by adaptive processes and handed down through generations by cultural transmission.” For the Adi, this knowledge is not abstract or codified in formal texts, but is embodied in rituals, oral traditions, seasonal observations, and community practices. It is experiential and deeply contextual, emerging from a long-term, place-based engagement with the environment. One of the most illustrative examples of this knowledge in action is the practice of *jhum* cultivation, also known as *swidden* agriculture. While often dismissed by modern agricultural discourse as primitive or environmentally damaging, *jhum* in the Adi context is a sophisticated and ecologically sound method of food production. It involves clearing a patch of forest for cultivation, followed by a fallow period that allows the forest to regenerate. This method ensures soil fertility, supports biodiversity, and prevents overexploitation of land. As Ramakrishnan (2007) argues, *jhum* represents “a time-tested adaptation to fragile and diverse ecological niches,” and its success lies in its integration with cultural and spiritual norms that promote restraint and respect for natural limits. In Adi villages, *jhum* cultivation is not merely a technical activity but a communal event often accompanied by rituals that honor the deities of land and fertility. The selection of land, the timing of sowing, and the harvest all follow ritual calendars and are informed by oral history and observation of ecological signs. Moreover, the diversity of crops grown in *jhum* fields—millets, maize, beans, and tubers—contributes to food security and ecological resilience. This agro-biodiversity is not incidental but is sustained through seed exchange, shared knowledge, and intergenerational learning. Another dimension of Adi environmental ethics is their system of totemic affiliations and taboos. Many Adi clans are associated with particular animals or plants, which they are prohibited from harming. These totemic relationships are both symbolic and ecological: they reinforce kinship bonds with the nonhuman world and contribute to biodiversity preservation. For example, a clan that holds the hornbill as its totem will not hunt or disturb the bird, indirectly aiding in its conservation. These

practices reflect what Descola (2013) describes as “analogism,” a mode of thought in which the world is composed of interlinked networks of relationships rather than isolated substances. The Adi worldview is thus fundamentally relational—every being, animate or inanimate, has a role in maintaining cosmic balance. This is reflected in their cosmology, where nature is alive, sentient, and sacred. Rivers are not watercourses but ancestors; forests are not resources but the abodes of spirits. Mamang Dai captures this worldview in her literary works, especially in *The Legends of Pensam* and *River Poems*. In *The Legends of Pensam*, the river is a recurring motif—not as a site of economic activity, but as a spiritual and narrative entity. When Dai writes of characters becoming “one with the river” after death, she is not using a metaphor but invoking an indigenous belief in the cyclical transformation of life into the landscape (Dai, 2006). Similarly, in *River Poems*, she addresses the river directly as a living being, mourning its degradation and invoking its memory as a lost relative (Dai, 2004). These representations serve a dual function. First, they preserve indigenous cosmological frameworks in the face of modernizing pressures. Second, they challenge anthropocentric models of development and conservation that disregard indigenous ways of knowing. By rendering the environment as a speaking subject rather than a silent object, Dai’s texts invite readers into an ethical relationship with nature, grounded in indigenous epistemology. Rituals in Adi society are not ancillary to environmental practice; they are foundational. Far from being superstitions or remnants of a pre-modern past, Adi rituals are sophisticated ecological technologies—systems of knowledge and action that manage resources, maintain social cohesion, and sustain cosmological order. Through these rituals, ecological knowledge is embedded in cultural memory and enacted in collective life. One of the most important Adi festivals is Solung, celebrated primarily by the Minyong subgroup of the Adi. Solung is an agricultural festival that marks the beginning of the sowing season. Offerings are made to various deities, such as Kine Nane (goddess of crops) and Doying Bote (god of wisdom), to ensure a bountiful harvest and protection from natural calamities. The rituals include animal sacrifices, recitation of mythic chants, and communal feasting. But beyond its ceremonial surface, Solung serves several ecological functions: it reinforces the seasonal calendar, distributes food resources, strengthens community bonds, and expresses gratitude to the land.

As Mamang Dai (2004) observes, such festivals are “moments when time folds into memory,” connecting the living with the ancestral, and the natural with the spiritual. In *The Legends of Pensam*, Dai describes festivals where the act of storytelling becomes a ritual itself, preserving ecological knowledge through narrative transmission. These stories—of forest spirits, animal messengers, and elemental forces—are not just entertainment but pedagogical tools. They teach the younger generation about safe foraging, animal behavior, sacred spaces, and environmental limits. Another ritual event, Aaran, celebrated during winter, is centered on communal hunting and meat-sharing. While it may appear extractive, Aaran is regulated by strict cultural codes. There are prohibitions against overhunting, and specific days are allocated to particular animal species. The sharing of meat ensures equitable distribution and prevents resource hoarding. The festival reinforces a sense of collective responsibility toward the forest and its fauna. Dai’s writing hints at such communal values when she portrays characters navigating the forest with reverence, often pausing to offer a chant or a gesture of respect before crossing a river or cutting a tree. The Etor festival, celebrated by the Galos (a related tribe to the Adi), focuses on the maintenance of social and ecological harmony. It includes rituals that invoke deities responsible for land fertility and forest health. Participants reaffirm their roles as custodians of nature, emphasizing restraint, reciprocity, and renewal. These ritual cycles map onto ecological cycles, ensuring that natural resource use is synchronized with seasonal regeneration. A crucial cultural institution that exemplifies indigenous conservation ethics is the practice of maintaining sacred groves. These forest patches are set aside as abodes of spirits and are strictly protected by taboos. No hunting, logging, or foraging is permitted within them. As Gadgil and Guha (1995) have shown, such cultural institutions often surpass modern conservation programs in effectiveness, as they are rooted in community belief and enforcement rather than external regulation. Sacred groves serve as genetic reservoirs, refuges for endangered species, and sources of medicinal plants. They also function as spiritual spaces for rituals and community gatherings. These groves are not isolated phenomena but part of a broader landscape of spiritual ecology. The entire Adi environment is marked by “invisible boundaries,” as Dai (2006) puts it, which separates the sacred from the profane, the permissible from the forbidden. Such spatial ethics regulate resource use in a decentralized but effective manner. Knowledge of these boundaries is passed through myths and songs, often sung by elders during festivals or work in the fields. In *River Poems*, Dai’s verse echoes these ecological boundaries, treating the forest as a sacred threshold that must be approached with humility:

“The forest has a language / The stones remember / The mountain has a soul” (Dai, 2004, p. 15). This poetic line encapsulates the Adi perception of landscape as animate and storied. It reminds readers that sustainability is not only about practices but also about perception—how one sees and relates to the world. As such, the rituals of the Adi people are not remnants of a disappearing past but living frameworks of ecological stewardship. They illustrate a sustainability model based on moral obligation, collective memory, and spiritual ecology. Mamang Dai’s literary engagement with these rituals reinforces their relevance and ensures their transmission in new forms. Her works become textual groves—sacred spaces where endangered knowledge is preserved and renewed.

THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

The interpretation of Mamang Dai’s literary work through the lens of indigenous ecocriticism and ethnopoetics offers a robust theoretical scaffold to understand her poetic articulation of ecological consciousness, cultural continuity, and resistance. These frameworks go beyond mainstream environmental criticism by foregrounding indigenous epistemologies, oral traditions, cosmologies, and relational ontologies. Rather than positioning sustainability as a technocratic or institutionalized response to environmental crisis, indigenous ecocriticism posits sustainability as a way of being—a lived, embodied, and communal practice rooted in the sacredness of land and the vitality of interspecies relationships (Adamson & Ruffin, 2013). Ethnopoetics complements this approach by providing tools to analyze the aesthetic, narrative, and performative dimensions of indigenous storytelling traditions, which often operate in ways that defy Western literary conventions (Tedlock, 1975). In the case of Mamang Dai, both these frameworks illuminate the distinctive features of her literary voice—its deep ecological sensibility, its dialogic engagement with memory and myth, and its stylistic alignment with indigenous orality. Through these lenses, Dai’s work can be read not merely as environmental literature but as indigenous ecological testimony—a body of writing that enacts, preserves, and reclaims Adi environmental philosophies.

Indigenous ecocriticism arises from the need to challenge and correct the anthropocentric, extractivist, and Eurocentric assumptions that underpin dominant environmental discourses. In Western environmental thought, especially as shaped by Enlightenment rationalism and Cartesian dualism, nature is often conceived as passive, external, and devoid of spirit—a resource to be managed or saved by human intervention. This epistemological divide between nature and culture has legitimized centuries of environmental exploitation and colonization (Plumwood, 1993; Merchant, 1980). Indigenous worldviews, in contrast, reject such separations. They are predicated on the notion of relationality, wherein all forms of life—humans, animals, rivers, stones, trees—are interconnected through networks of reciprocity, kinship, and moral obligation (Kimmerer, 2013). The land is not a possession but a relative; knowledge is not abstract but situated and experiential. As Adamson and Ruffin (2013) assert, indigenous ecocriticism “decenters the human and the West from ecological analysis,” placing indigenous knowledge systems and cosmologies at the core of environmental thought. Mamang Dai’s writing is profoundly aligned with this relational ethos. Her poems and narratives do not treat nature as backdrop or theme but as subject and participant. In *River Poems* (2004), rivers are addressed as sentient beings, capable of memory, emotion, and agency. The poem “The River” personifies the river as a keeper of secrets and a witness to time, thereby reclaiming the river from modern cartographies and returning it to its mythic and cultural role in Adi cosmology. Dai writes: “There is a language / Older than words— / The river knows” (Dai, 2004, p. 9). This line exemplifies the indigenous belief that nature has voice and consciousness. It also functions as a critique of epistemic injustice—the failure of dominant knowledge systems to recognize the communicative capacity of nonhuman beings. By invoking the “language” of the river, Dai positions indigenous environmental knowledge as both alternative and authoritative. In *The Legends of Pensam* (2006), Dai extends this relational ontology through the concept of “Pensam,” which means “the in-between.” This space is both literal and metaphorical, signifying liminality between past and present, myth and history, human and more-than-human. The stories unfold in nonlinear, interwoven patterns, reflecting a worldview that does not compartmentalize experience but embraces its cyclical, interdependent nature. Dai’s characters are shaped by their relationships with rivers, forests, and spirits, and their narratives are embedded in the landscape. The forest is not merely scenery; it is a living archive of memory, myth, and ancestral presence. Such portrayals dismantle the Cartesian paradigm and affirm what indigenous theorist Leanne Betasamosake Simpson (2014) calls “land-based knowledge”—a framework where knowledge emerges through relationship with specific places and beings. Dai’s work offers literary embodiment of this idea, foregrounding the forest and river as agents of cultural memory and ecological ethics.

Her texts become sites of ecological survivance—a term coined by Gerald Vizenor (1990) to denote a blend of survival and resistance that preserves indigenous presence in the face of erasure.

If indigenous ecocriticism provides a philosophical grounding, ethnopoetics offers a method for reading the form, rhythm, and language of Dai's work in culturally informed ways. Coined by Jerome Rothenberg and Dennis Tedlock in the 1960s and 70s, ethnopoetics aims to represent and analyze the poetic and narrative forms of oral literatures, particularly those of indigenous and non-Western communities (Tedlock & Tedlock, 1975). Ethnopoetics challenges the literary norms of Western modernism by emphasizing performance, repetition, cyclical structure, and the interplay between speech and memory. Dai's literary style resonates deeply with ethnopoetic principles. Her prose and poetry often incorporate repetitions, ritual invocations, and nonlinear sequencing that mirror the oral traditions of the Adi. In *The Legends of Pensam*, for example, the narrative voice shifts between first-person reminiscence, omniscient storytelling, and communal lore. The boundary between the storyteller and the story is intentionally blurred, echoing the participatory mode of oral transmission where stories are collectively owned and continually reshaped. Moreover, Dai frequently incorporates ritual chants and local idioms that resist easy translation. This linguistic texture reflects what Ngũgĩ wa Thiong'o (1986) calls 'linguistic decolonization'—the practice of embedding indigenous language, rhythm, and worldview within literature written in colonially imposed tongues (such as English). In doing so, Dai asserts the validity of indigenous aesthetic forms within the global literary canon. Considering a passage from *The Black Hill* (2014), in which Dai describes the movements of Gimur, a tribal woman connected to the forest: "She moved like a shadow / Behind the trees / The silence was her companion / The forest knew her name" (Dai, 2014, p. 45). The brevity, repetition, and orality of this passage evoke the rhythm of Adi chants. The forest is personalized—it "knows" her name—demonstrating both relational ontology and performative aesthetics. The narrative voice assumes the qualities of a ritual chant or a lament, echoing the ethnopoetic tradition that treats storytelling as performance, memory, and invocation. In addition, Dai's use of cyclical time in her narratives reflects the indigenous concept of temporality. In contrast to the linear, progress-oriented time of Western modernity, Adi time is seasonal, cyclical, and recursive. Events are understood through repetition and return rather than irreversible change. Birth, death, and transformation are part of a cosmological cycle that includes the environment. Dai's narratives are therefore structured not by plot development in the conventional sense but by rhythmic unfolding, memory loops, and intergenerational reverberations. This narrative ecology is itself an aesthetic of sustainability, echoing natural cycles and honoring temporal continuity.

CHALLENGING MODERNITY AND ENVIRONMENTAL IMPERIALISM

Both indigenous ecocriticism and ethnopoetics serve as counter-discourses to the dominant narratives of modernity, colonialism, and environmental imperialism. They contest the erasure of indigenous epistemologies by asserting the intellectual, ecological, and artistic sovereignty of indigenous peoples. Mamang Dai's literature participates in this intellectual resistance. Her work frequently critiques the imposition of developmentalist paradigms that devalue indigenous knowledge. In *The Black Hill*, British colonial agents view the forest as a frontier to be mapped, tamed, and commodified. Their attempts to introduce Christian morality, scientific rationality, and cartographic control are met with subtle but powerful resistance by the indigenous characters. Gimur, with her knowledge of herbs and trails, represents an alternative epistemology—one based on intimacy with the land rather than domination over it. This critique of epistemic violence—the imposition of one knowledge system over another—is central to indigenous ecocriticism. Scholars like Linda Tuhiwai Smith (1999) argue that colonization was not just a seizure of land but a suppression of indigenous ways of knowing. Literature like Dai's restores that suppressed knowledge, offering a "textual sovereignty" (Warrior, 1995) where indigenous worldviews can speak back to power. Her writing also subverts the narrative of ecological crisis as a contemporary problem solvable by technocratic means. Instead, Dai shows that unsustainability is a colonial inheritance—the result of centuries of resource extraction, land dispossession, and cultural dislocation. By contrast, Adi ecological practices—encoded in stories, rituals, and oral law—represent long-standing strategies of resilience. Her literature thus becomes both a record and a resource: an archive of ecological wisdom and a blueprint for decolonial futures.

The combined frameworks of indigenous ecocriticism and ethnopoetics provide a rich interpretative lens through which Mamang Dai's work can be read as both ecological philosophy and cultural expression. Through these

frameworks, we can see that her literature is not simply about nature but is an extension of an indigenous ontology where land is alive, language is sacred, and storytelling is a ritual of remembrance and resistance. Indigenous ecocriticism allows us to situate Dai's work within a broader discourse of relational sustainability, challenging dominant paradigms that separate human from nature, culture from ecology, and knowledge from place. Ethnopoetics, in turn, offers a methodology to appreciate the aesthetic, performative, and rhythmic dimensions of her work—qualities that stem from and reflect her Adi heritage. In articulating Adi ecological ethics through poetic and narrative form, Mamang Dai contributes to a growing body of indigenous literature that not only preserves but enlivens traditional knowledge. Her writing is a powerful affirmation that the future of sustainability lies not in abandoning the past but in recovering the wisdom it holds. Her work invites us to listen—not only to rivers, forests, and ancestors—but also to the literary rhythms through which they speak.

ADI SUSTAINABLE PRACTICES IN CONTEMPORARY CONTEXT

In the anthropocene era, characterized by climate instability, environmental degradation, and ecological dislocation caused by extractive capitalism and developmentalist paradigms, indigenous communities like the Adi people of Arunachal Pradesh offer an invaluable counter-narrative rooted in sustainable living, ecological balance, and a deep symbiotic relationship with nature. As custodians of ecological wisdom honed over generations, the Adi community embodies practices that modern sustainability discourses are only beginning to appreciate. Their lifeways—agricultural, architectural, spiritual, and socio-political—are informed by principles of biodiversity conservation, resource recycling, and climate adaptability. Yet, these practices are under siege from contemporary forces of globalization, environmental commodification, and cultural erosion. Mamang Dai's literary corpus not only reflects these shifts but also archives and reanimates Adi epistemologies in ways that assert their relevance and necessity in the twenty-first century. One of the most critical elements of Adi sustainable practices is their traditional agricultural system, which sustains both biodiversity and food security. A cornerstone of this system is the maintenance of indigenous seed banks—repositories of native rice, millet, maize, and legume varieties cultivated and preserved by communities through participatory processes. These seeds are not only genetically diverse and resilient to climatic fluctuations but also carry cultural and spiritual significance. As Sharma et al. (2018) emphasize, the role of indigenous women in preserving, exchanging, and managing these seed varieties is central to agro-biodiversity conservation. These women, often referred to as "seed guardians," ensure that the community maintains a dynamic relationship with its environment through seed rituals, festivals, and the oral transmission of knowledge. By relying on intercropping methods and low-input techniques, Adi agriculture exemplifies what Shiva (1997) terms "earth democracy"—a system where human and nonhuman needs are balanced through participatory ecological stewardship. However, the spread of hybrid seeds and genetically modified organisms, pushed by agribusinesses and aided by state-sponsored agricultural schemes, has increasingly marginalized these traditional practices. Market pressures and monoculture models threaten to displace indigenous crop varieties, resulting in a loss of both ecological and cultural diversity. Dai's representations of agricultural rituals and rural life in *The Legends of Pensam* (2006) subtly underscore the sacredness and sustainability of these practices, serving as both a critique of modern interventions and a celebration of indigenous autonomy. The Adi people's farming practices are anchored in the use of organic manure—a process that transforms agricultural waste into nutrient-rich compost. Unlike chemical fertilizers that degrade soil health and pollute waterways, the Adi community employs natural fertilizers such as leaf litter, animal dung, and decomposed biomass. This system reflects an intricate understanding of nutrient cycles, soil ecology, and climatic compatibility.

These organic methods are also integrated into *jhum* or shifting cultivation, which the Adis practice with long fallow periods that allow forests to regenerate naturally. As Ramakrishnan (2007) argues, such practices, while often dismissed as ecologically damaging by colonial and postcolonial bureaucracies, actually reflect a nuanced ecological intelligence. When practiced in its traditional form, *jhum* is both regenerative and sustainable, maintaining forest-soil-agriculture equilibrium. The emphasis on organic inputs and cyclical resource management underscores a principle of ecological reciprocity, where human extraction is balanced by regeneration. Mamang Dai's poetic landscapes in *River Poems* (2004) often depict scenes of rural life infused with metaphors of renewal and fertility, echoing these embedded ecological values. By capturing such scenes,

Dai's writing challenges the dominant developmentalist narrative that views traditional agriculture as backward or inefficient.

Architecture, as both a functional and symbolic dimension of culture, reflects the Adi community's sustainable orientation. Their use of bamboo, cane, and timber—materials readily available in their environment—for constructing homes, fences, storage units, and community halls reveals an ecologically embedded architectural ethos. These structures are designed to be climate-responsive: bamboo houses are elevated on stilts to avoid floods and pest infestations, ventilated naturally to suit tropical conditions, and constructed without synthetic materials that contribute to carbon emissions. This vernacular architecture is not merely practical but also deeply aesthetic and cultural. It reflects the Adi worldview of living with the environment rather than on it. As Rai (2012) notes, such housing systems are adaptable, biodegradable, and low-cost, thus offering blueprints for sustainable urbanism. However, the infiltration of concrete, steel, and brick housing, often introduced through state-funded rural development schemes, is eroding these practices. These modern constructions are not only environmentally unsuited to the topography but also alienate communities from their material culture. Dai's depictions of homes, hearths, and villages—especially in *The Black Hill* (2014)—carry an elegiac tone, lamenting the loss of architectural intimacy with the land while evoking the resilience of indigenous craftsmanship. Another significant sustainable practice among the Adi people is the use of traditional water-harvesting systems. These include bamboo drip irrigation, channelized spring water, and communal water tanks built from organic materials. These techniques are especially relevant in hilly terrains where conventional irrigation is difficult. They reflect a sophisticated understanding of hydrology, gradient mechanics, and seasonal precipitation patterns. Community ownership and maintenance of water resources are central to these systems. Water sources are often accompanied by taboos that restrict overuse, contamination, or privatization. Such mechanisms ensure that water remains a shared resource, governed by social norms rather than market forces. According to Das and Bora (2016), the success of these systems lies in their decentralized, participatory governance and their adaptability to climate variability. Mamang Dai's symbolic use of rivers, streams, and monsoons in her poetry is not incidental but deeply resonant with this hydrological ethics. In *River Poems*, water is both a literal and metaphorical force—life-giving, memory-bearing, and spiritually potent. Her verse elevates water from a utilitarian resource to a cultural and cosmological actor, embodying what ecocritics call the “agency of nature” (Bennett, 2010).

Despite their ingenuity and resilience, Adi sustainable practices are under severe threat from deforestation, hydroelectric dams, infrastructure development, and cultural assimilation. The aggressive expansion of large-scale dam projects on the Siang River, often without adequate consultation with local communities, poses grave threats to Adi livelihoods, biodiversity, and spiritual practices tied to the river. These projects are justified in the language of national development and energy security, sidelining indigenous rights and ecological consequences (Menon, 2014). Likewise, forest clearing for commercial plantations and illegal logging, often facilitated by weak enforcement of environmental regulations, is fragmenting habitats and displacing traditional land-use systems. In a region where the forest is not only a source of livelihood but also a site of cultural identity, such deforestation is tantamount to epistemicide—the erasure of indigenous knowledge systems. Cultural assimilation, fueled by mainstream education, media, and religion, further undermines traditional ecological knowledge. Younger generations are often disconnected from ancestral practices, rituals, and cosmologies. Mamang Dai's narratives resist this erasure by chronicling Adi myths, oral histories, and ecological philosophies in written form. Her literary activism thus acts as a cultural repository and a pedagogical intervention, reintroducing endangered lifeways to both native and global audiences.

Dai's literature functions not only as aesthetic expression but also as a form of ecological resistance and cultural preservation. Through her nuanced storytelling, she renders visible the sophisticated ecological ethics of the Adi people—ethics that have long been ignored or undermined by dominant paradigms of development and conservation. Her writing defamiliarises the reader from the anthropocentric logic of mastery over nature and instead foregrounds a relational ontology where land, water, and forests are animated agents of culture and history. *The Legends of Pensam*, for example, integrates folklore, personal memory, and environmental observation to create a mosaic of Adi ecological consciousness. Similarly, in *The Black Hill*, she narrates the story of colonial incursion through the metaphor of geological and cultural rupture, exploring the entanglements of history, environment, and identity. These texts do not merely depict sustainable practices; they enact them through narrative forms that mirror ecological cycles, communal voice, and polyphonic temporality. Dai's literary

practice embodies what Vizenor (1990) calls 'survivance'—the active presence and resilience of indigenous peoples through storytelling. Her work affirms that the documentation and dissemination of traditional knowledge systems can be a powerful counter to epistemological colonization. The Adi people's sustainable practices—rooted in seed sovereignty, organic farming, bamboo architecture, communal water systems, and spiritual ecology—represent an invaluable ecological paradigm in the context of the climate crisis. Their practices are not relics of a pre-modern past but dynamic, evolving systems of knowledge and resilience. However, they face existential threats from deforestation, industrial development, and cultural erosion. Mamang Dai's literary intervention not only reaffirms the vitality of these indigenous practices but also preserves and propagates them for future generations. Her work situates Adi ecological wisdom within broader discourses of indigenous resistance, environmental ethics, and cultural survivance. In doing so, she expands the scope of sustainability studies, reminding us that the future of the planet may well depend on remembering what modernity has forgotten.

MAMANG DAI'S LITERARY REPRESENTATION OF ADI SUSTAINABILITY

Mamang Dai, a prominent literary voice from Arunachal Pradesh and a member of the Adi tribe, plays a crucial role in preserving and representing indigenous knowledge systems, particularly those related to sustainable environmental practices. Her literary oeuvre is steeped in the ecological ethos of the Adi people, blending myth, memory, and landscape to reconstruct a worldview where nature is not a passive backdrop but an active agent in cultural and ontological narratives. Through her novels and poetry—most notably *The Legends of Pensam* (2006), *River Poems* (2004), and *The Black Hill* (2014)—Dai builds a powerful archive of environmental imagination rooted in Adi cosmology, resisting both ecological degradation and cultural erasure. Her works do more than merely depict ecological beauty; they function as tools of political and cultural resistance, transmitting indigenous ecological values in the face of modernity, climate change, and epistemic violence.

MYTH AS ECOLOGICAL MEMORY IN THE LEGENDS OF PENSAM

In *The Legends of Pensam*, Dai creates a unique literary topography that blends myth and memory to articulate the Adi people's sustainable worldview. The term 'Pensam'—translating to 'in-between'—is itself emblematic of Dai's narrative technique and thematic focus. It denotes a transitional space that is not merely geographic but metaphysical, straddling the binaries of history and legend, the human and nonhuman, and the living and the spiritual (Dai, 2006). This liminality is essential for understanding how Dai invokes myth as a reservoir of ecological memory and sustainable ethics. One striking narrative within the text is the tale of Hoxo, a boy who, after his death, is believed to have merged with the river. His disappearance is not framed as a tragic loss but a transcendental return to the river, symbolizing the inseparability of human life from natural elements. The river, in this context, is not an inert water body but a sentient entity capable of absorbing, transforming, and preserving life. Dai's rendering of the river as a spiritual repository parallels the Adi cosmological belief in the sacredness of rivers, forests, and mountains. This representation challenges the anthropocentric, extractive view of nature promoted by modernity. Rather than seeing nature as a resource to be harnessed, Dai reinstates its sacredness and relationality. Her narrative structure—nonlinear, cyclical, and interspersed with oral histories—mimics indigenous ways of knowing that emphasize interconnectedness, temporality, and respect for all forms of life. As Mukherjee (2010) argues, such mythopoetic storytelling constitutes an alternative epistemology that destabilizes the linear logic of development and progress. Through *Pensam*, Dai also critiques ecological imperialism by subtly exposing the disruptions caused by modernity and state-driven development. The stories, though seemingly localized, speak to a larger history of dispossession and environmental degradation that has affected indigenous communities across the Global South. In doing so, *The Legends of Pensam* becomes both a literary and ecological document—a textual sanctuary where the wisdom of the Adi people is preserved and communicated for future generations.

ENVIRONMENTAL ETHICS IN RIVER POEMS

Mamang Dai's *River Poems* (2004) further deepens her environmental engagement through a poetic form that is both elegiac and archival. Her poems are suffused with a sense of ecological loss, mourning the degradation of rivers, forests, and trails that once defined the Adi landscape. Yet, alongside this mourning is a quiet resilience—a belief in the endurance of indigenous knowledge and the spiritual kinship between human beings and the

environment. In the poem “The River,” Dai writes: “What is time? / The shadow that slips / Into the waiting forest” (Dai, 2004, p. 11). This metaphorical rendering of time as a shadow that merges into the forest encapsulates the Adi cosmological view of time as cyclical and interconnected with natural rhythms. Unlike the linear, mechanical time of Western modernity, Adi temporality is organic, non-hierarchical, and shaped by the seasonal cycles of nature. The forest, in this poetic line, is not merely a physical space but a spiritual entity that waits, remembers, and absorbs. It serves as a metaphor for cultural and ecological continuity. Moreover, Dai’s poetic engagement is ethnopoetic in nature—drawing on oral traditions, ritual songs, and metaphors deeply embedded in Adi cosmology. As Rangarajan (2014) notes, such indigenous poetics function as a form of resistance against the extractive logics of developmentalism and globalization. Dai’s poems retain the cadences and metaphysical concerns of Adi oral literature, making her work a crucial site of ecological remembrance. Her poetry not only laments the loss of rivers but simultaneously invokes their regenerative capacities. By anthropomorphizing rivers and treating them as kin, Dai challenges the modern scientific discourse that sees rivers as units of hydroelectric potential. This is particularly relevant in the context of dam-building in Arunachal Pradesh, which has led to the submergence of entire ecosystems and the displacement of indigenous communities (Vaghlikar & Das, 2010). Through her poetic evocation, Dai protests such ecological disruptions and reclaims the river as a sacred space integral to Adi cultural identity. In *River Poems*, Dai becomes an environmental historian of sorts—preserving, commemorating, and re-inscribing the spiritual and ecological dimensions of her homeland. Her poems function as counter-narratives that oppose the dominant discourse of development and instead foreground sustainability rooted in indigenous ethics.

THE BLACK HILL AND POSTCOLONIAL ECOLOGIES

The Black Hill (2014) expands Dai’s ecological concerns into the realm of postcolonial critique. Set against the backdrop of the 19th-century colonial expansion into the eastern Himalayan frontier, the novel explores the intersection of empire, landscape, and indigenous epistemologies. The protagonist, Gimur, a tribal woman, embodies the wisdom and resilience of her people. Her knowledge of medicinal herbs, seasonal migrations, and sacred landscapes reflects a deep-rooted sustainable ethos that is both ecological and spiritual. Through Gimur and her interactions with nature, Dai constructs a counter-epistemology that challenges the colonial gaze. British officers in the novel perceive the land through a cartographic and extractive lens, reducing sacred mountains to strategic points and forests to timber reserves. Their attempts to map, measure, and control the landscape are symbolic of what Guha (1989) terms ‘the conquest of nature’—a hallmark of colonial modernity. In contrast, the indigenous characters relate to the land not as owners but as caretakers, highlighting an ethic of stewardship rather than domination. The colonial intrusion is depicted not only as a political act but as an ecological one, disrupting indigenous time-space sensibilities. Dai subtly shows how the arrival of the British brings with it new diseases, commercial crops, and administrative boundaries, which alter the ecological and cultural fabric of the region. This echoes Nixon’s (2011) concept of “slow violence,” where environmental degradation unfolds gradually, invisibly affecting marginalized communities through displacement and loss of livelihood. Moreover, *The Black Hill* is also a narrative of intergenerational memory. It recovers voices and experiences that colonial archives often erased. By foregrounding indigenous ecological knowledge and its disjuncture under colonial rule, Dai critiques the long-term impacts of empire on the environment. She presents indigenous sustainability not as a relic of the past but as a viable alternative to both colonial and postcolonial developmental paradigms. In doing so, Dai contributes to the field of postcolonial ecocriticism—a framework that examines the link between environmental degradation and historical processes of colonization. Her novel does not merely document the clash between two cultures; it interrogates how this clash reconfigures ecological relationships and sustainability practices.

AESTHETICS AND ETHICS OF REPRESENTATION

Across these three major works, Dai’s literary style itself becomes a method of conveying indigenous sustainability. Her use of cyclical temporality, mythic structure, and polyphonic narrative aligns with the environmental rhythms she seeks to portray. The aesthetics of her writing are intimately tied to its ethics; the form mimics the content. By refusing linear plots or individualistic protagonists, Dai aligns her storytelling with the communal, nonlinear worldview of the Adi people. Moreover, her blending of the oral and the literary blurs the boundaries between

genres, embodying what Gerald Vizenor (1990) describes as “survance”—a synthesis of survival and resistance. This ethnopoetic strategy resists both cultural erasure and ecological exploitation by affirming indigenous knowledge as living, adaptive, and politically potent. Mamang Dai’s literary representations of Adi sustainability are multifaceted, spanning genres and historical periods to build a rich tapestry of ecological imagination. Her work is both a documentation and a defense of indigenous lifeways that prioritises ecological balance, spiritual symbiosis, and cultural memory. By embedding Adi cosmology within her poetic and narrative structures, Dai offers an alternative to dominant environmental discourses that often exclude or marginalize indigenous voices. In *The Legends of Pensam*, *River Poems*, and *The Black Hill*, Dai does not merely describe the Adi relationship with nature—she performs it through her aesthetic choices, linguistic cadences, and narrative rhythms. Her writing stands as a testament to the sustainability of indigenous knowledge systems, asserting their relevance in an age of climate crisis and cultural homogenization. In foregrounding the sacredness of rivers, the wisdom of plants, and the endurance of myth, Dai reclaims ecological knowledge as both a cultural right and a planetary necessity.

COUNTERING EXTRACTIVISM THROUGH NARRATIVE

In an era where development is frequently equated with industrial expansion, resource extraction, and infrastructural conquest, indigenous voices have often been silenced or marginalized. Extractivism—defined as the large-scale removal of natural resources for global markets—is not merely an economic process but a cultural and epistemological imposition that disrupts local ecologies and knowledge systems (Acosta, 2013). Mamang Dai’s literature resists this logic through narrative acts that foreground the wisdom, resilience, and sustainability of Adi ecological worldviews. Her work articulates a powerful literary response to extractivism by reclaiming indigenous storytelling as a mode of environmental resistance and cultural survival. In *The Legends of Pensam* (2006), Mamang Dai crafts a narrative landscape where myth and memory intermingle with the ecological and cultural rhythms of the Adi people. The text does not follow a linear plot; instead, it mirrors the oral storytelling traditions of indigenous communities, emphasizing cyclical time, relational identities, and sacred geographies. Within this mythopoetic structure, government interventions and modern development projects are presented not as symbols of progress, but as disruptive forces that sever the organic ties between the community and their environment. The arrival of roads, machinery, and extractive industries in Dai’s fictionalized Adi territory initiates a slow disintegration of communal relationships to land, water, and ritual. These infrastructural changes often appear in the background, as ominous, unnamed presences rather than dramatized conflicts. Yet their impacts are deeply felt—ritual spaces are abandoned, rivers are dammed, and ancestral knowledge is devalued in favor of technocratic solutions. Dai’s subtle yet incisive critique mirrors Rob Nixon’s (2011) theory of “slow violence,” where ecological and cultural harm occurs incrementally and invisibly over time, disproportionately affecting marginalized communities. Extractivism in Dai’s narrative is not limited to material depletion but extends to epistemological extraction—the undermining of indigenous systems of knowledge, meaning-making, and being. As the narrative voice in *The Legends of Pensam* reveals, “Change came. Not with a bang, but like the slow opening of a river’s mouth, altering the course of everything” (Dai, 2006, p. 114). This metaphor of the river—both central to Adi cosmology and vulnerable to state-led hydroelectric projects—serves as a synecdoche for the ecological transformations wrought by extractivist development.

In the face of such disruption, Dai’s characters turn to storytelling, ritual, and memory as forms of cultural resilience and resistance. The elders and women, in particular, become carriers of ecological memory and custodians of sustainable practices. Their narratives, embedded with myth, ritual, and moral codes, serve as counter-histories that challenge dominant narratives of linear progress and resource commodification. For instance, the tale of the boy who turns into a river or the woman who disappears into the forest is not merely folklore but a narrative assertion of the animacy of nature. These stories confer agency to rivers, trees, and animals, disrupting anthropocentric hierarchies and re-establishing the relational ethics of the Adi worldview. Such storytelling practices function as what Gerald Vizenor (1990) terms “survance”—a neologism combining survival and resistance. Survance emphasizes the active presence of indigenous narratives in shaping identity and challenging colonial erasures. Dai’s literature echoes the sentiments of indigenous literary scholars like Leanne Betasamosake Simpson (2017), who argue that indigenous storytelling is not just a cultural expression but a pedagogy—a way of transmitting ecological knowledge, ethical principles, and collective memory. Through

stories, the Adi people remember which plants to use for medicine, when to sow seeds, which rivers are sacred, and which practices sustain life across generations. These are not static traditions but dynamic, adaptive knowledge systems that offer viable alternatives to ecologically destructive models of development.

Another critical strategy in Dai's narrative resistance to extractivism is the central positioning of women as ecological custodians and storytellers. In *The Legends of Pensam*, as well as in her other works, women are portrayed as repositories of oral tradition, ritual knowledge, and sustainable practices. Their roles in agriculture, food preservation, and communal ceremonies make them indispensable to the ecological integrity of Adi society. Through these characters, Dai resists both ecological and gendered forms of extraction. The imposition of modernity often comes with patriarchal biases that devalue women's roles in environmental management, replacing traditional ecological knowledge with technocratic, masculinist paradigms. Dai reclaims these spaces by giving narrative authority to female characters who embody the land's memory and speak against its degradation. As Ariel Salleh (1997) argues in her theory of ecofeminism, the oppression of nature and women often occurs through the same extractive logic—one that sees both as passive resources to be managed and exploited. Dai's fiction contests this view by showing that the survival of ecological systems is contingent upon the continuation of matrilineal knowledge, ethical land stewardship, and a relational understanding of human-nature entanglements. Crucially, Mamang Dai's work does not merely offer a nostalgic return to a precolonial past. Instead, it imagines a future where sustainability and cultural survival are co-constitutive. Her characters often navigate the tensions between tradition and modernity, crafting hybrid identities that negotiate the demands of the contemporary world while rooted in indigenous ethical frameworks. This forward-looking perspective aligns with the theoretical positions of scholars like Kyle Powys Whyte (2018), who argue that indigenous environmental justice must be future-oriented, emphasizing community resilience, intergenerational knowledge transmission, and adaptive governance. Dai's narratives provide precisely this model—a literary space where indigenous epistemologies are not relics of the past but blueprints for sustainable futures. By reframing progress through an Adi lens, Dai disrupts extractivist narratives that equate development with GDP growth, urbanization, or technological mastery. In her literary world, sustainability is measured not by extraction rates or infrastructural density, but by the health of rivers, the vibrancy of oral traditions, and the communal rituals that tie people to place. The result is a holistic vision of development that values ecological integrity, cultural plurality, and ethical reciprocity. Finally, it is important to recognize Dai's narrative strategy as a form of literary activism. Her work functions as a cultural archive, an environmental critique, and a political intervention. In making visible the stories, practices, and philosophies of the Adi people, Dai performs a counter-extractivist act at the level of discourse itself. She resists the commodification of nature by textualizing its sacredness, relationality, and narrative richness. In a world increasingly shaped by climate change, biodiversity loss, and socio-ecological crises, such literary interventions are not merely symbolic but politically potent. They serve as alternative epistemologies capable of informing policy, education, and community action. Dai's work contributes to the growing field of indigenous ecocriticism, which seeks to restore balance not just between humans and nature, but also between narrative authority and cultural dignity.

CONCLUSION

Mamang Dai's literary contributions offer a rich, nuanced rearticulation of sustainability through the lens of indigenous epistemologies. Her representations of Adi ecological lifeways do not simply preserve a disappearing cultural memory; they function as active, living interventions into the ongoing discourse surrounding environmental degradation, indigenous rights, and alternative models of sustainability. In centering indigenous philosophies of relationality, Dai's work not only resists extractive modernity but also constructs a viable ethical framework for sustainable living in the 21st century. Her texts are, therefore, simultaneously poetic invocations and political interventions—rendering visible the invisible, the marginal, and the sacred in an increasingly commodified and anthropocentric world. In works such as *The Legends of Pensam* and *River Poems*, Mamang Dai does not merely depict nature as a setting or background for human drama; rather, nature is a living, sentient force with its own agency, memory, and moral logic. This is consonant with the Adi worldview, which perceives the environment not as an object of domination but as a dynamic network of reciprocal relationships. Rivers, forests, animals, and even stones in Dai's writing are imbued with vitality and narrative significance, illustrating a metaphysical vision where ecological integrity is inseparable from cultural identity. Through her poetic and

narrative imagination, Dai mobilizes Gerald Vizenor's fusion of survival and resistance that characterizes much of indigenous storytelling. Her texts serve as a literary archive of Adi sustainable practices, from water harvesting and seed preservation to ethical hunting rituals and the spiritual significance of bamboo architecture. These are not merely anthropological details but narrative strategies that re-inscribe indigenous environmental knowledge into the literary and ecological imagination. In particular, Dai's emphasis on memory—as embodied in rituals, oral traditions, and women's storytelling—functions as an ecological ethics in action. Memory in her texts is not nostalgic; it is performative. It acts as a method of resistance against epistemological colonization and ecological erasure. In preserving and performing these memories, Dai contributes to what Linda Tuhiwai Smith (1999) describes as “decolonizing methodologies”—efforts by indigenous scholars and artists to reclaim narrative authority and re-center indigenous ways of knowing.

One of the most compelling aspects of Dai's literary project is her rejection of sustainability as a purely technocratic or developmental paradigm. In contrast to dominant sustainability discourses—often grounded in carbon offsets, conservation technologies, and climate adaptation strategies—Dai presents sustainability as a cultural practice rooted in land, language, and lifeways. Her vision aligns with the principles of indigenous ecocriticism, which critiques the anthropocentric and Eurocentric biases of mainstream environmentalism and foregrounds indigenous worldviews where nature is relational, animate, and ethical (Adamson & Ruffin, 2013). The Adi philosophy of tangam (harmony) and solung (communal ritual) is deeply woven into Dai's narratives, suggesting that ecological balance cannot be achieved without cultural balance. In this way, she advocates for a holistic sustainability that integrates environmental stewardship with cultural continuity. This approach resonates with Arturo Escobar's (2018) concept of pluriverse—a world where multiple ways of being, knowing, and relating to the Earth coexist without being subsumed into a single developmental or scientific worldview. In the context of the anthropocene—a term that describes the current epoch of human-driven planetary change—Dai's work serves as a corrective to narratives of mastery and control. Her stories and poems suggest that genuine sustainability must be founded not on domination but on humility, reciprocity, and respect. These principles are enacted in her characters' relationships with the environment, whether it is the river that must not be named casually, the forest that remembers those who traverse it, or the sacred mountain that governs seasonal migrations.

Mamang Dai's literary work thus becomes more than a representation of indigenous environmental ethics—it becomes an ethical intervention in its own right. By invoking myth, memory, and oral tradition, Dai generates a form of 'literary ecology' that challenges both extractivist ideologies and the narrative conventions of mainstream literature. Her use of non-linear time, fragmented narrative, and polyphonic voices disrupts Western literary norms and mirrors the ecological and cultural complexity of Adi lifeways. This narrative structure itself becomes a form of resistance to homogenization, commodification, and the epistemic violence of modernity. The ethical force of Dai's writing lies in its capacity to make the reader feel the vitality and fragility of a world organized around interdependence rather than individualism. Her texts extend an invitation to reconsider what it means to be sustainable—not simply as a matter of consuming less or conserving more, but as a matter of living rightly within a web of relationships that includes not only humans but also plants, rivers, animals, and spirits. This is an ethics of care, rooted not in abstraction but in daily practice, ritual, and embodied memory. Moreover, Dai's aesthetic choices—her lyrical prose, her ethnopoetic sensibility, and her deep engagement with Adi cosmology—ensure that her texts resonate not only as literary works but also as political statements. In a world where indigenous voices are frequently marginalized or instrumentalised, Dai reclaims narrative authority and insists on the legitimacy of indigenous knowledge as a foundation for ecological thinking.

While deeply rooted in the specific geography and culture of Arunachal Pradesh, the ecological wisdom embedded in Dai's writing has global relevance. As climate change accelerates and ecological thresholds are breached, policymakers, scholars, and activists are increasingly turning toward indigenous knowledge systems for guidance. Dai's literary corpus anticipates this shift, offering insights into sustainable living that are not based on scarcity or sacrifice but on abundance, reciprocity, and relational ethics. In this regard, her work intersects with the broader movement of Indigenous Environmental Humanities, which seeks to integrate indigenous perspectives into environmental discourse and academic inquiry. Scholars such as Robin Wall Kimmerer (2013) and Kyle Powys Whyte (2018) have emphasized the importance of indigenous philosophies in addressing ecological crises. Dai's literature contributes to this conversation by providing narrative models of ecological

consciousness that are aesthetically compelling, ethically grounded, and politically urgent. Her characters do not seek to escape modernity but to engage with it on their own terms, using the tools of memory, ritual, and story to assert their right to exist differently. This is not a rejection of development per se, but a call for pluriversal futures—futures where many worlds can coexist, and where development does not mean erasure but mutual flourishing. In summation, Mamang Dai's literature functions as a crucial site for reimagining sustainability beyond the technocratic and anthropocentric confines of dominant paradigms. Her poetic invocation of Adi ecological ethics offers not only a critique of extractive modernity but also an alternative vision rooted in cultural resilience, relationality, and reverence for nature. In doing so, Dai contributes to the decolonization of environmental thought and enriches the global search for more just and sustainable futures. Her work reminds us that sustainability is not merely a question of policy or science, but of story—of the narratives we tell about the Earth, our place within it, and the futures we dare to imagine.

REFERENCES

1. Acosta, A. (2013). "Extractivism and Neoextractivism: Two Sides of the Same Curse". *Beyond development: Alternative visions from Latin America* (pp. 61–86). Rosa Luxemburg Foundation.
2. Adamson, J., & Ruffin, K. (2013). *American Indian Literatures and the Environment: A Reader on Native American Literatures and Ecocriticism*. University of Arizona Press.
3. Bennett, J. (2010). *Vibrant matter: A Political Ecology of Things*. Duke University Press.
4. Berkes, F. (2018). *Sacred Ecology* (4th ed.). Routledge.
5. Das, T., & Bora, R. (2016). "Water Resource Management among the Indigenous Tribes of Arunachal Pradesh". *International Journal of Indigenous Studies*, 2(1), 88–102.
6. Dai, M. (2004). *River Poems*. Writers Workshop.
7. Dai, M. (2006). *The Legends of Pensam*. Penguin Books India.
8. Dai, M. (2014). *The Black Hill*. Aleph Book Company.
9. Descola, P. (2013). *Beyond Nature and Culture*. University of Chicago Press.
10. Escobar, A. (2018). *Designs for the Pluriverse: Radical Interdependence, Autonomy, and the Making of Worlds*. Duke University Press.
11. Gadgil, M., & Guha, R. (1995). *Ecology and Equity: The Use and Abuse of Nature in Contemporary India*. Routledge.
12. Guha, R. (1989). *The Unquiet Woods: Ecological Change and Peasant Resistance in the Himalaya*. University of California Press.
13. Kimmerer, R. W. (2013). *Braiding Sweetgrass: Indigenous Wisdom, Scientific Knowledge and the Teachings of Plants*. Milkweed Editions.
14. Maffi, L., & Woodley, E. (2012). *Biocultural Diversity Conservation: A Global Sourcebook*. Routledge.
15. Menon, M. (2014). "Damming the Siang: Development versus Displacement in Arunachal Pradesh". *Economic and Political Weekly*, 49(26–27), 43–50.
16. Merchant, C. (1980). *The Death of Nature: Women, Ecology, and the Scientific Revolution*. Harper One.
17. Mukherjee, P. (2010). *Postcolonial Environments: Nature, Culture and the Contemporary Indian Novel in English*. Palgrave Macmillan.
18. Nixon, R. (2011). *Slow Violence and the Environmentalism of the Poor*. Harvard University Press.
19. Plumwood, V. (1993). *Feminism and the Mastery of Nature*. Routledge.
20. Rai, M. (2012). "Indigenous Architecture of Arunachal Pradesh". *Cultural Survival Quarterly*, 36(2), 15–18.
21. Ramakrishnan, P. S. (2007). "Traditional Forest Knowledge and Sustainable Forestry: A North-east India Perspective". *Forest Ecology and Management*, 249(1–2), 91–99. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.foreco.2007.04.009>
22. Rangarajan, S. (2014). "Environmental Literature and the Postcolonial Imagination". In G. Garrard (Ed.), *The Oxford Handbook of Ecocriticism* (pp. 258–276). Oxford University Press.
23. Rangarajan, S. (2014). "The Idiom of Ecology in the Poetry of Mamang Dai". In A. Mukherjee (Ed.), *Postcolonial Ecologies: Literatures of the Environment* (pp. 91–107). Oxford University Press.
24. Salleh, A. (1997). *Ecofeminism as Politics: Nature, Marx and the Postmodern*. Zed Books.
25. Sharma, A., Tiwari, A. K., & Basar, N. (2018). "Indigenous Knowledge and Sustainable Development in Arunachal Pradesh". *Indian Journal of Traditional Knowledge*, 17(3), 446–454.
26. Sharma, P., Taba, H., & Yami, T. (2018). "Indigenous Women and Seed Sovereignty in Arunachal Pradesh". *Journal of Indigenous Agriculture*, 3(1), 55–71.
27. Shiva, V. (1997). *Biopiracy: The Plunder of Nature and Knowledge*. South End Press.
28. Simpson, L. B. (2017). *As We Have Always Done: Indigenous Freedom through Radical Resistance*. University of Minnesota Press.

29. Simpson, L. B. (2014). "Land as Pedagogy: Nishnaabeg intelligence and Rebellious Transformation". *Decolonization: Indigeneity, Education & Society*, 3(3), 1-25.
30. Smith, L. T. (1999). *Decolonizing methodologies: Research and indigenous peoples*. Zed Books.
31. Tedlock, D., & Tedlock, B. (Eds.). (1975). *Teachings from the American Earth: Indian Religion and Philosophy*. Liveright.
32. Vagholikar, N., & Das, P. J. (2010). *Damming the Northeast*. Kalpavriksh & Aaranyak.
33. Vizenor, G. (1990). "Aesthetics of Survivance: Literary Theory and Practice". *Narrative Chance: Postmodern Discourse on Native American Indian Literatures* (pp. 1-15). University of New Mexico Press.
34. Vizenor, G. (1990). *Manifest manners: Postindian Warriors of Survivance*. Wesleyan University Press.
35. Warrior, R. (1995). *Tribal Secrets: Recovering American Indian Intellectual Traditions*. University of Minnesota Press.
36. Whyte, K. P. (2018). "Indigenous Science (fiction) for the Anthropocene: Ancestral Dystopias and Fantasies of Climate Change Crises". *Environment and Planning E: Nature and Space*, 1(1-2), 224-242.