



30

REVISITING MYTH: A STUDY OF SELECT NORTH-EAST INDIAN WOMEN  
POETS

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**Abstract:**

*Literature establishes an inseparable connection between ancient and modern cultures. Contemporary literature often draws upon ancient traditions such as myths, legends, folklore, and various other cultural elements. Myths are pervasive across world literature and cultural narratives, primarily originating from religious and traditional belief systems. They encompass literary forms such as epics and other oral traditions. Notable examples of great epics include Homer's Iliad and Odyssey, Virgil's Aeneid, and Ved Vyasa's Mahabharata, along with other Indian epics. Over time, myths have flourished in diverse literary expressions, and tales, legends, and folklore have garnered scholarly attention. Writers frequently incorporate these elements into their works to enhance their creations, making them engaging, relevant, and culturally resonant. This paper aims to explore the myths and traditional cultural practices reflected in the poetry of North-East women poets Mamang Dai and Easterine Kire.*

**Keywords:** *Literature, Myth, Folklore, Traditional, Culture, etc.*

This summer I can sing  
the songs of the caged warrior  
singing to the rough anonymity of trees,  
and here, on these branches  
I can leave the shell of my armour  
like the shells of forgotten words  
recalling everything we once knew.  
(*This Summer - the Cicada's Song*)

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Mamang Dai, the 2017 Sahitya Akademi Award-winning writer, opens her poem 'This Summer - the Cicada's Song' with profound reflections on her observations about life, culture and folk tradition. Through her poetic expression, she intricately weaves together the rich tapestry of myths, legends, folklore, and traditional culture. Her works have earned her acclaim both nationally and internationally within the realm of English literature. Hailing from Arunachal Pradesh in northeast India, Dai's background adds depth to her writing. The people in north-east live amid fear and uncertainty, yet they find solace in their myths, legends, and folklore, as well as in the breathtaking natural beauty of their hilly landscapes. This beauty serves as an essential reference point in the literary works of writers, particularly women poets like Mamang Dai and Easterine Kire. Reflecting on this traditional oral culture, these writers express a sense of nostalgia, and Mamang Dai emphasizes the significance of the region's myths, legends, and folklore in almost of her works.

The history of our race  
begins with the place of stories.  
(*An Obscure Place*)

The exploration of Dai's poems transports readers to an ancient mythological realm filled with profound emotions. This region is frequently characterized by pain, agony, insurgency, suffering, and identity crises. Yet, both readers and writers often find solace in these literary creations. The appeal of such poetry extends beyond regional audiences, resonating with national and international readers alike, owing to its universal quality of satisfaction. Engaging with these mythological tales, woven through various literary forms such as poetry, drama, and fiction, brings genuine joy.

Dai's depiction of the evening can thus be likened to the evening star or Hesperus, with her medicine maker assuming the role of a divine healer. He identifies the symptoms of human ailments—breath and demise—without needing permission, as he embodies a god-like figure. His prescriptions are inscribed in the pages of a natural exercise book, depicting a seamless blending of the natural and the divine. This imagery is powerfully captured in Dai's expressive language.

The evening is  
the greatest medicine maker  
testing the symptoms  
of breath and demise,  
without appointment  
writing prescriptions  
In the changing script  
of a cloud's wishbone rib,  
in the expanding body of the sky.  
(*Sky Song*)

Through her poetry, Dai seeks to establish a clear connection between mythology and nature, imagination and reality, humanity and creation, and, importantly, humanity and the natural world. While nature provides everything necessary for a comfortable and peaceful existence, there are darker aspects of society where some individuals attempt to disrupt and violate this tranquility, even in what is often referred to as an ever-evolving civilized society.



Remember, because nothing is ended,  
but it is changed,  
(*The Missing Link*)

Everything changes, much like a river that alters its flow but never truly ends. Dai emphasizes the enduring nature of certain cultures, even as they transform over time. In the poem *The Missing Link*, the river, through Dai's memories, emerges as a witness to the complex realities of North-East India. This region embodies a juxtaposition of a deadly and superstitious culture on one side and a serene natural environment that is occasionally disrupted on the other. Traces of traditional practices still linger. The land is described as an “old land of red-robed men / and poisonous ritual.” Thus, Dai reflects in the following way.

I will remember then  
the great river that turned, turning  
with the fire of the first sun,  
away from the old land of red robed men  
and poisonous ritual,  
when the seven brother fled south  
disturbing the hornbills in their summer nests.  
(*The Missing Link*)

The essence of Dai's poetry encapsulates uncanny situations and relationships within the natural world. This evokes Samuel Taylor Coleridge's well-known concept of the “willing suspension of disbelief,” which engages with themes of supernaturalism. From this perspective, one could argue that Dai's poetry resonates with elements of romanticism and mysticism. In some tribes, people interact with poisonous snakes as if it were a form of celebration, showcasing their relationship with these creatures to the public. Dai illustrates a vivid portrayal of two distinct beings coexisting: poisonous snakes and humans residing in caves. These depictions further enhance the themes of mythology and magical culture present in the work.

Traditional culture and cultural practices serve as witnesses to the rich heritage of myths, legends, and folklore prevalent among the diverse communities of North-East India. These traditions are intricately linked with the region's enduring natural elements, such as mountains, rivers, clouds, and the lush beauty of its landscapes. Prior to the emergence of literary works that translated oral traditions into written form, there were no documented accounts of their mythological narratives, folklore, and, most importantly, their cultural identity. Dai has rightly pointed out in her poem *The Missing Link*:

There are no records.

Dai's poetry weaves together threads of myth, folklore, and natural elements, epitomized by the figure of a river. This river transcends mere physicality; it is described as “the green and white vein of our lives, linking new terrain.” The river takes on the characteristics of a sentient being as if it possesses a voice of its own. This metaphorical voice of the river poignantly conveys the identity crisis faced by the people of the region.

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Remember the river's voice:  
where else could we be born,  
where else could we belong,  
if not of memory,  
divining life and form out of silence?  
*(The Missing Link)*

The poem *The Missing Link* resonates deeply with themes of memory. It evokes the rich tapestry of ancient oral culture, interwoven with myths and the beauty of the natural world. The work seeks to establish a connection between primitive experiences and contemporary issues, yet this link appears to be severed. This reflects the struggle of the region's people as they grapple with a loss of the stamina and rhythm that once defined their cultural identity.

And in the villages the silent hill people still await  
the promised letters, and the meaning of words.  
*(The Missing Link)*

In the poem 'Small Towns and the River' small towns and Dai's hometown present a clear evidence of grief and peace. One's death kindles grief and the trees hold peace. So, in the world grief and peace sit side by side:

Small towns always remind me of death.  
My hometown lies calmly amidst the trees.  
*(Small Towns and the River)*

The poem also deals with the theme of transience and permanence. In this perishable world of 'life and death' the traditional culture and ritual are permanent:

Life and death, life and death,  
only the rituals are permanent.  
*(Small Towns and the River)*

The folklore of the North-East region of India is deeply intertwined with natural phenomena, particularly rivers. From a mythological perspective, rivers are seen as animate entities possessing divine qualities. They are omnipresent and can be likened to the concept of pantheism, serving as witnesses to the unfolding of creation from the beginning to the present moment. Thus, the great river is portrayed in a philosophical and picturesque way.

The river has a soul.  
It knows, stretching past the town,  
from the first drop of rain to dry earth  
and mist on the mountaintops,  
the river knows  
the immortality of water.  
*(Small Towns and the River)*

It is believed that humanity will ultimately return to its enduring home, the origin from which it comes to inhabit this material world. The belief systems within society foster a conviction

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in the idea of resurrection. According to various scriptures, while the body may perish, the soul remains eternal. Additionally, it is asserted that all living beings owe their existence to the sun. The soul is often likened to light, which explains why a residing body radiates warmth while a lifeless one feels cold. Consequently, the sun is regarded as the true dwelling place of the soul. Dai, through her mythological and imaginative prowess, paints a vivid picture of this perspective.

The dead are placed pointing west.  
When the soul rises  
It will walk into the golden east,  
into the house of the sun.  
(*Small Towns and the River*)

The poem concludes with an emphasis on communal harmony, depicting a desire among the region's inhabitants to coexist peacefully with their gods, much like the river, while cherishing their traditional culture and beliefs. Furthermore, myth and magic are integral components of the lives of individuals within society. This notion is effectively illustrated in Lewis D. Wurgaft's *The Imperial Imagination: Magic and Myth in Kipling's India*, the Hungarian psychoanalyst and anthropologist Geza Roheim states, "We grow up through magic and in magic, and we can never outgrow the illusion of magic. Our initial responses to the frustrations of reality are rooted in magic. Without this belief in ourselves and our unique abilities, we cannot withstand the challenges posed by our environment and the superego."

Dai is an exceptional lyrical poet whose works vividly portray myths, folklore, and the enchanting beauty of nature. The threads of mythology weave through her poetic imagery, reflecting an antique culture, oral literature, and traditional folklore. The references to myth in Dai's poem 'The Balm of Time' play a crucial role in illuminating the culture of the indigenous people of North-East India, as well as their beliefs in gods and nature.

Yes I believe in gods, in the forest faith  
Of good and evil  
Spirits of the river  
And the dream world  
Of the dawn.  
(*The Balm of Time*)

Dai has emerged as a prominent voice representing her state's culture, myths, and legends, as well as its breathtaking natural beauty, through her imaginative prowess and creative works in poetry, fiction, articles, and various other literary forms. The central themes of her creations revolve around myths, nature, scenic landscapes, legends, and folklore. In her poem 'Voice of the Mountain,' a perspective of pantheism is evident in the portrayal of the natural phenomenon of the mountain. Rather than simply being a geological feature, the mountain is depicted by Dai as a sentient being whose existence has been intertwined with civilization since its dawn. It can also be interpreted as an omnipresent deity, aware of everything that surrounds it, much like the river. The relationship between the mountain and the sky carries a mythological significance. Whenever the mountain attempts to embrace her lover, the sky, she encounters obstacles posed by the sun during the day and the moon at night, both of which create distance between them.

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The mountain is a disguise  
of earth woman rising to meet her sky lover.  
drop the rainbow down,  
the rain is potent drink  
for spirits seeking heavenly brides.  
*(Voice of the Mountain)*

Festivals and dances are also noteworthy in the culture of the northeastern region of India. In her poetry, Dai mentions 'Ponung,' one kind of dance performed by the female characters; 'Tapu' is another kind of dance performed by the male characters. Such a culture is expressed in an inimitable way:

We danced so long  
We broke all our bracelets  
To please a fancy.

Deforestation is a concerning reality in the region, prompting people to feel nostalgic about a past characterized by lush greenery and a seemingly happier, more peaceful existence. The poetry of Dai and her contemporaries illustrates the deep connection that the people maintain with their land and culture, including their myths, festivals, rituals, and traditional practices. In Dai's poetry, both humans and animals are portrayed as integral components of this shared heritage.

The tiger runs swiftly from my father's house  
calling my name  
Brother! Man Brother!  
Have mercy for our destiny.  
*(Man and Brother)*

This narrative-like imagery invites readers into a mythological realm where a tiger calls out to a human, addressing him as 'Brother.' Such a scenario is only plausible within the confines of a myth. Through her poetry, Dai effectively illustrates the intricate relationship between myth and reality, focusing on the creation of humankind. In this piece, natural and physical myths intertwine so seamlessly that reality emerges through the lens of myth. Ultimately, the essence captured here is the creation of humanity.

We are the children of the rain  
of the cloud woman.  
*(Birthplace)*

Easterine Kire stands out as a prominent literary figure from North East India, specifically from Nagaland, an Angami Naga enclave. Now residing in Norway, Kire has garnered both national and international recognition in the realm of English literature. Her oeuvre primarily reflects a profound engagement with real-life experiences and observations, intricately portraying the cultural and social landscape of her native Nagaland. Kire is credited as the first Naga poet to publish poetry in the English language, with her inaugural collection *Kelhoukevira* released in 1982. Additionally, she is the first novelist to present Naga narratives through English prose, as exemplified by her 2003 work *A Naga Village Remembered*. Following these seminal works, her

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literary portfolio expanded to include novels such as *A Terrible Matriarchy* (2007), *Mari* (2010), and *Bitter Wormwood* (2011). In 2017, she ventured into novella writing with *Don't Run, My Love*, and her contributions extend to children's literature as well.

Kire's dedication to preserving Naga culture is evident through her efforts to translate two hundred oral Naga poems, thereby safeguarding the oral traditions of her people. Her creative impulses draw heavily from her lived experiences as a Naga, weaving together elements of myth, folklore, and legend to explore and immortalize her culture through written text, thus challenging the predominance of oral narratives.

She articulated her creative philosophy in a dialogue with Babli Mallick, stating, "I am inspired, not influenced, to write about my life and the people I meet in life. Their life stories inspire me. Many oral narrators have shared many stories with me, and all these inspire me to write." Kire's narratives resonate with the Naga people's intrinsic connection to nature, reflecting their belief in its myth-making potential. The Naga worldview encompasses various natural elements—trees, stones, insects—as storied entities, infusing their cultural identity with rich mythological narratives, such as those surrounding catfish, leaves, butterflies, lakes, stones, and forests.

The Naga population, diverse in its tribal composition, is characterized by distinct cultural practices and mythologies linked to their environment. Nagaland is home to sixteen major tribes, including Angami, Ao, Chakesang, Chang, Sema, Lotha, Phom, Konyak, Kachari, Rengma, Sangtam, Pochury, Yimchunger, Khiamungan, Zeliang, and Kuki, each contributing to a tapestry of folklore, folk songs, and myths. This unity amidst diversity fosters a collective Naga identity, which Kire embodies in her literary explorations.

In her thematic exploration of the human condition, Kire frequently employs a metaphorical comparison of the human body to a map, suggesting that the body encapsulates the entirety of human experiences—both the positive and negative aspects of life. This conceptualization functions as a mythic representation of the body, reflecting the complexities and dualities inherent in human existence. Through this lens, Kire deftly intertwines body and narrative, creating a multifaceted view of life that is both intensely personal and universally resonant. It is, thus, sketched in her poem:

The body is a map  
It remembers every abuse  
And every caress  
Each time it was loved  
Each time it was hurt  
Each time it was fed  
Each time it was starved  
Each time  
Each time  
It carries the marks on its map  
It is haunted  
By the bad  
But it rememorizes  
The Good  
The body is a map

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It carries  
It carries.  
(*The Body is a Map*)

The state of Nagaland is renowned for its unique cultural aspects. The Naga people adhere to traditional belief systems that are largely centered around natural elements. They place significant importance on their nightly dreams and thoughts, which they believe can influence their lives. The environment surrounding them is rich with their cultures, customs, folklore, myths, and various practices. The Naga people cherish their traditional habits and have a deep appreciation for nature, often finding solace in its beauty. They take pleasure in the natural sounds of birds and sometimes feel a sense of nostalgia when reflecting on their dreams, for the indigenous people of Nagaland, dreams and words serve as sources of inspiration. This inspiration, akin to the myths, resonates with both readers and the wider community. Kire's poetry beautifully encapsulates these themes in a vivid and evocative manner. The picture is reflected in the following words:

I dream of boats  
I dream  
No not true  
I dream of skylines  
I dream of sparrows  
The one that fell  
Down the chimney  
The one with its leg  
Tied to a thread  
That my brother and I played with when we were very little.  
(*Dreams*)

Kire serves as a keen observer of the authentic facts, celebrations, adoration, cultures, and customs of the Naga people. Through her evocative poetry, she transforms inanimate natural objects into animate forms, illustrating the Naga people's deep-seated beliefs in nature and their veneration of natural elements as sacred entities. It is also noteworthy that myths play a vital role in expressing the power of goddesses such as Durga and Kali, a theme that has persisted since the dawn of human culture, especially in India, as presented in Raj Balkaran's *The Goddess and the King in Indian Myth: Ring Composition, Royal Power and the Dharmic Double Helix*. Exploring Kire's poems unveils the rich tapestry of mythological beliefs, stories, legends, and other cultural practices. Her work highlights distinctive features of the North East Naga community, reflecting their reverence for trees and forests, grounded in the belief that the omnipotent dwells within natural elements. Thus, Kire showcases her cultural heritage through valuable oral traditions, folklore, and stories in her poetic creations.

Stones hold significant myth-making power within the belief systems of the indigenous people of Nagaland, a state in North East India. Central to this belief is the myth of the Living Stones, located in Longtrok, a village near Tuensang. Interestingly, "Longtrok" can be translated into "six stones." These six stones, known as *Sangtams* among the Naga people, are believed by the "Ao" community to be animated stones symbolizing the incarnation of gods. These deities are thought to be responsible for the existence of many other stones scattered across the earth.





Consequently, stones are objects of deep respect and reverence within Naga culture, and it is considered unacceptable to disrespect either the stones or the gods at any time. Kire subtly expresses her concern regarding the treatment of these stones by some individuals.

Through their literary contributions, Mamang Dai and Easterine Kire have effectively interrogated and subverted dominant narratives while simultaneously presenting alternative perspectives on critical themes such as identity, community, and the human condition. By skillfully reinterpreting and recontextualizing myth, these poets have forged a novel lexicon of resistance, empowerment, and self-expression. Their poetry stands as a compelling testament to the transformative power of myth in shaping, reflecting, and challenging societal norms and expectations, highlighting the intricate interplay between cultural narratives and individual experiences.

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