



RESEARCH ARTICLE

Eco-Critical Study of *The Black Hill*

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Abstract

The present paper aims to critically provide an eco-reading of *The Black Hill*, a novel by Mamang Dai where the environment is the central theme of human history, memory and identity in the context of the novel. The novel can deal with the local worldviews in Arunachal Pradesh by making them understand that forests, rivers and mountains are sacred places that enable them to maintain material lives and spiritual attachments. Through a close reading of this text, this paper will explore the ways the themes of land, ecological kinship, and animistic spirituality in the narrative foreground of Dai, and features of tension created out of colonial exploitation, displacement and extractive policies.

As the discussion shows, *The Black Hill* is interdisciplinary as it spans both literature and environmental sciences. Its depictions of subsistence culture, biodiversity, and ecological processes are aligned to contemporary scientific concerns of sustainability, conservation, and climate change. At the same time, the activity of Dai is an ecology discourse because it contains the cultural memory and declares the moral responsibilities to the more-than-human world. The novel finds its place in the modern ecological humanities and environmental ethics through the comparison of the ecological ethics of the native peoples to the colonial pasts of land ownership.

The paper will argue that Dai's fiction is both a cultural artefact and an ecological archive which could offer some perspectives on sustainable living and policy of conservation. It also emphasizes the urgency of the interdisciplinary approach forming a connection between indigenous literature, ecology, and political structures. In this, *The Black Hill* provides an insight into how to fulfill ecological justice and sustainable futures.

Keywords: Eco-criticism, Indigenous ecological knowledge, Environmental humanities, Sacred geography, Sustainability (SDG 15: Life on Land), Postcolonial environmental ethics

Introduction

Literature can do more than describe nature. It can make us feel how land, water, wind, and sky shape human life. Eco-criticism is a study of that relationship, and the texts are considered not only to reflect that relationship but as part of it as well. Scholars demonstrate that stories and poems convey ecological values, provide a voice or language to responsibility, and contribute to public environmental awareness of environmental change (Löschnigg, 2019; Mehnert, 2016; Kerouad et al. 2021). New studies also suggest that language and literature are involved in creating environmental awareness in the daily environment and

in the classroom environment (Gurbanova, 2024). In this paper, those insights will be presented in the context of an indigenous Northeast Indian context by taking up a close reading of Mamang Dai's novel *The Black Hill*.

Dai is a writer out of Arunachal Pradesh (India). and her fiction is an ear to the land, the sky, and the water. The novel situates its characters in a high mountain ecology in which human lives are dependent on slopes, conifers and snow lines: "*High in the mountains near the headwaters of the Dau River, Kajinsha and Gimur settled down to their new life together*" (p. 75). This is in specific histories and place names, as the author's note reminds us, the "Mishmee Hills" being a "*real cultural (and ecological) region of Arunachal Pradesh's borderlands*" (p. 275).

The story is about the land which thinks and remembers. Centrally, the novel is a contest between possession and kinship, which Gimur first mentions about land early in the book. Her response goes from attending to the senses of air and body. Near the end of the novel, Dai connects the body to natural forces – air and wind are the mediums that carry memory through time in the novel. The text is an emotional and environmental amalgamation in a small cosmology of

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kinship. Dai ends with a picture of the elemental kinship with the characters set in relation to earth and sky.

The paper aims to demonstrate the ways in which *The Black Hill* is involved in «place to science» translations, in its focus on the rivers, forests and religious geographies. The novel can be read as an environmental discourse responding to eco-critical theory, which emphasizes the ethics of interdependence, restraint, and care (Löschnigg, 2019; Mehnert, 2016; Kerouad et al. 2021; Gurbanova, 2024). In Dai's novel, the environment is not simply a backdrop to nature, but a force alive, that shapes identity, feeling, and history of the native people.

Eco-criticism Framework

As one of the most powerful literary-studies methods to comprehend the relation between human culture and nature, Eco-criticism has become a major trend. It is based on environmental humanities, questions anthropocentric interpretations and invites us to consider texts as space of the production and dissemination of ecological values. The postcolonial eco-criticism, as it has been highlighted by scholars like DeLoughrey and Handley (2011), reveals the exploitation of the environment and a silencing of the culture particularly in indigenous and colonized lands. In a similar vein, we are reminded by Huggan and Tiffin (2015) that postcolonial texts are «witnesses to interwoven histories of empire, ecology and local worldviews. Similarly, the recent research on ecological discourse analysis emphasizes the importance of understanding the role of language in creating perceptions of nature (Chu et al. 2024; Yuang & Yong-bi, 2024).

It is at this juncture that Mamang Dai's *The Black Hill* is located. Land is a material resource in the novel, appearing repeatedly, and an act of sacredness. In the beginning of the text Gimur asks, "What is this land? Men spoke of land as a possession. 'From this stream to the limits of the jungle and up to that hill with the white rock is my land,' they said" (p. 14). Yet the shaman corrects this view: "*The land belongs to us. It is the soul of our ancestors. Where would we be, what would we do, without this land?*" (p. 25). These passages foreground two competing discourses ownership versus kinship that eco-criticism is well equipped to analyze.

By juxtaposing human conflicts with the endurance of rivers and mountains, Dai dramatizes what Leipold et al. (2019) describe as the layered discursive struggles in environmental policy and imagination. Later in the novel, Gimur recognizes her bond with hills, winds, and sunsets, affirming an ethic of unity between land and self. The novel asserts an ecocentric ethic. The environment is not passive background but an active agent that breeds memory, feeling, and identity.

Eco-critical readings also benefit from linking literary imagery to indigenous ecological knowledge. Kajinsha and Gimur's survival practices fishing, planting hard

mountain rice, and tending Mithun cattle show a sustainable interaction with the ecosystem. This mode of land-use exemplifies what Chu et al. (2024) identify as ecological discourse embedded in routine practices. It is language and story that preserve such practices against erasure.

Huggan and Tiffin (2015) argue that eco-criticism should not only analyze metaphors of land but also recognize political histories of dispossession. Dai is attentive to this. Her narrator records that blood feuds, betrayals, and colonial intrusions were "always about land" (p. 11). This perspective aligns with postcolonial ecologies that bind environment to conflict, history, and memory.

Finally, *The Black Hill* also dramatizes what Yuang and Yong-bi (2024) call the "corpus of ecological discourse," where repeated motifs wind, mountain, river form a vocabulary of place. Later, natural motifs - such as wind, become a medium of history, fusing environment with human feeling. Here the natural element is a medium of time, binding body and history into a single ecology.

Mamang Dai and Context

Mamang Dai writes from Arunachal Pradesh with a steady attention to land, memory, and lived ritual. She is a poet and a novelist, a chronicler of the Brahmaputra borderlands and puts the indigenous experience not at the margins, but at the heart of the story world. The critics of *The Black Hill* have demonstrated how Dai's retelling of history takes place in the context of ecology and culture through his focus on rivers, mountains, animals, trade routes, and the law of the clans (Santhiswari & Palanisamy, 2021; Lakshmi & Natarajan, 2019; Daimari n.d.; Hebbar & Mallya, 2024).

The book, which starts out with a stark warning of a memory-work that began with terrain: "*I once knew a man whose shoulders touched the sky... So silent and endless, this story who can tell it all? I only know that I will remember and never forget...*" (p. 8). Dai's characters roam burned villages and fight ridgelines where the conflicts are named plainly: "*These were old enmities kept alive by succeeding generations, and the root of conflict, it seemed to Gimur, was always about land*" (p. 71).

There is a tension that is created between ownership and kinship in this novel. The shaman's worldview, as a way of thinking about land as soul and life of the ancestors, is throughout the story, while men speak about land as property. Gradually her loss turns into an understanding that her life, and her longing, is tied to the landscape.

The other aspect of context is subsistence and skill. Dai presents a local economy that is more like an ecology: "*Kajinsha had agricultural land—tei-nyal—and separate spots for hunting, fishing... as well as forest land where chal, the beloved animal Gimur knew as mithun... were allowed to roam freely*" (p. 82). Trade and healing follow the seasons and routes: Kajinsha is a trade in "*mishmee tita, the medicinal coptis, and bih, aconite, which was used as poison on arrow*

heads and spear blades" (p. 82). Even a brief promise is suffused with place: *"I will never come here again... a tiny place of meeting, of death and rebirth, like a mysterious universe emblazoned in her heart"* (p. 79–80).

Literature and eco-criticism theories suggest that literature mirrors and constructs environmental awareness in the context of both colonized and indigenous society (Hebbar & Mallya, 2024; Santhiswari & Palanisamy, 2021). History revisioning from the Northeast that focuses on the local and indigenous knowledge is reflected in Dai's method of narration (Daimari n.d.; Lakshmi & Natarajan, 2019).

Nature/Landscape

The Black Hill has a point of view on landscape. May not be mountains, rivers and winds behind the action. They carry it around, evaluate, recall. This prologue foreshadows the fact that one's memory is always attached to landscape, and that the landscape can grow to the proportions of sky/mountain. Story and terrain are mentioned side-by-side. Thrice are the mountains not bare. They measure it.

As Gimur and Kajinsha travel, the forest and river shape every choice. The march "into the mountains" along "the Lohit River" is a map traced by wind and water. "The wind slapped against their faces... wading across numerous streams" until they pass "an abandoned village gutted by fire" where "the root of conflict, it seemed to Gimur, was always about land" (p. 71). Precisely, Dai's landscape is written. It visualizes the social connotation of tributaries, ridges and weirs by naming them. This aligns with the case study research in eco-literature which sees place as a protagonist in ethical stories and actions (Dasht Peyma, 2025). This tension between property and ancestral spirit echoes the themes discussed earlier in the Eco-criticism Framework section (Leipold et al., 2019; Zimmerman, 2020).

The landscape of the book is touchy and slow. When we are in a state of clarity, the earth speaks through the body amid grief. Landscape is an intimate space, a means to make sense of sadness, to make sense of her identity and survival, as Gimur discovers it is in the earth and the weather. All the verbs are actions. Bred. Tied up. The line transforms landscape into a more intimate space, an experience of trauma ecologies which Zimmerman (2020) registers as a connection between lived pain and habitat, in which elements are witnesses and companions instead of merely set dressing.

But Dai also writes about the high country without the abandonment, and he doesn't lose its working knowledge in the process. The mountains are high, the landscape is awe-inspiring and precise, the slopes of granite and minerals shape Gimur's perception of the landscape. Awe and mineral facts are in balance in the scene. These passages in mountain-route studies are codes of the sustainable route-making, which must do so: slope, rock, water, weather and

the human rhythms following it (Mutana & Mukwada, 2018). Once the journey becomes settlement, the book maintains a patterned livelihood of landscape in the forefront. The list is very much a local ecological plan. Co-ordination of crops, animals, forest, water and mobility is done in a small radius. A common complaint in universal design studies in the built environment is that the sense of what is done and how it is done (occupation) is missing (Watchorn et al. 2021). That's the link provided by Dai's page, from an indigenous perspective. Space is divided according to the activities people engage in with rivers, fields and forests and the needs of the animals.

The book is an intermingling of sensory images and social history throughout. Rivers changed course and "waterways changed course and dried up. Men fought and killed each other. Blood flowed" (pp. 71–72). The lines will not accept that there is a conflict/geomorphology divide. Place-making is not value free. It is part of flight and the blazing of villages and the ephemeral topography of a round clearing 'behind a strong stockade of bamboo' at dusk (p. 72). With this entanglement in mind, image and advocacy, scene and stewardship and repair (Dasht Peyma, 2025), eco-literature scholarship calls us to keep it in mind.

Human-Nature Relationship

The Black Hill is defined by forest, river and ridge and human life is patterned in these forms. Where the land lies are home: water, wind and slope are determining factors for a household's settlement. This dependence is very clear in the shift to high country, where Dai refers to this region as: "High in the mountains near the headwaters of the Dau River, Kajinsha and Gimur settled down to their new life together" (p. 75). The next image is not a view of the valley, but rather scenery. It is a map of needs and limits, a longhouse on stilts, over a precipice, snow lines denoting the limits of what is possible (p. 75–76).

Subsistence practices, such as farming plots, hunting grounds and mithun forests are in close association with livelihoods and landscape. It's a very basic list but demonstrates a design of work to share space with animals and trees. It resonates with the deep ecology's perspective of living in harmony with the more-than-human as a way of life, not as an abstraction (Reka & Chitra, 2025; Matin Parsa & Salami, 2024).

Ritual and story will be protecting that ethic. In the novel, there is a relationship between belief and observation and memory. Gimur has the ability to feel the presence of people in trees and ridges. She "did not doubt that there were unseen spirits lurking in the trees and watching from the mountaintops" (p. 72). These lines have a spirituality of their own, and an environmental awareness. It teaches the body to AWARENESS of weather, sound and path. Comparative investigations of traditions reveal analogous mixings of custom and care: stories and names perpetuating habitats

in thought and in rule of thumb (Triyono, Sahayu & Fath, 2023; Wang, 2020).

Intrusion and fire are set against that, in the book. The walk through “an abandoned village gutted by fire” illustrates how violence disrupts social relations as well as the settled pattern of place (p. 71). It is not concealed, but it is a cause. “These were old enmities kept alive by succeeding generations, and the root of conflict, it seemed to Gimur, was always about land” (p. 71). The argument of the novel is carried on by this contrast. The local indigenous knowledge and ethos of using and relating to the land through ritual and wisdom is part of this struggle against claims of possession and boundaries that become streams and rocks. A tendency to use such possessive language not only encourages extractive practices but also blinds people to caring for their environment, which is also evident in a highly varied archive (Denisoff, 2023).

In a couple of simple sentences, Dai expresses the philosophy, and there are sadness and clarity. It takes Gimur years to find the words to convey what the land means to her: “All this time my heart and its longing have been tied up with these features these hills, this sunset, this cold dawn and icy wind. The land has bred this. We are one. This is my desire. My life!” (p. 72). The verbs are physical. Tied up. Bred. The line reads as a vow, and as a model of place-consciousness. It shows what ecological education often tries to build in classrooms through stories and images. It shows why language matters for the habits that keep waters clean and forests standing (Triyono, Sahayu & Fath, 2023).

The novel is also adherent to cycles. And the wind and water and stone and sky travel in the body and tell time. Towards the end, the voice becomes very quiet and cosmic: «Feel the wind... hear the air rustling through my body as the murmur of centuries» (p. 273). The kinship is closed on the following page: And I am earth and Kajinsha is the sky (p. 274). This is not metaphor alone. It is a way of releasing the self into the air and soil. A passage seen as eco-critical work, it is a description which sketches a picture of an ethic that eventually borders on deep ecology but does not abandon the sphere of practice. Sustainable land management of fields, fishing sites, and forest commons is based on a seasonal and slope-following, rather than profit and speed, follow-up (Matin Parsa & Salami 2024; Reka & Chitra, 2025).

Environmental Challenges and Ecological Ethics

Dai's novel keeps returning to loss, flight, and the costs of possession. The journey past “an abandoned village gutted by fire” marks displacement as a wound that alters both people and place (p. 71). The cause is set out without ornament: “the root of conflict, it seemed to Gimur, was always about land” (p. 71). Eco-critical ethics begins here, with a refusal to treat land as inert property and a willingness to ask what kinds of claims destroy the very ground of life (Attfield 2014; Palmer, McShane & Sandler 2014).

This book makes the connection between geomorphology and violence. “Waterways changed course and dried up. Men fought and killed each other. Blood flowed” (pp. 71–72). The line draws a connection between ecological disturbance and social rupture and thus acknowledges feedback familiar to us today in the wake of deforestation and river sand mining that cause slope and river rupture. The story reaffirms the indigenous ethic of land as soul and ancestor which contrasts with the colonial and extractive ones (see Eco criticism Framework). An ethic of interdependence moves beyond instrumental logics and towards an ethic of the responsibilities of place and people, owners or states (Attfield 2014; Washington & Maloney 2020).

Dai also demonstrates the way sacred geographies are under threat in the context of extraction framing the view. One dramatic scene shows a ridge blazing with the light of minerals: “A mountain shone before Gimur's eyes like a golden pyramid... It was mica, the ore of the mountain reflecting the sunlight” (p. 72). The sentence is wondrous and cautionary. What is beautiful can be interpreted as a sewn line to cut. These are not merely abstract issues: eco critical concerns are very real here, as sacred spaces are being destroyed and biodiversity lost. They are manifested as the fragility of a named stone, a certain river, a village to be burned and left behind (Palmer, McShane & Sandler 2014; Zozulák & Zozuláková, 2022).

These ethics are being challenged in colonial encounters. Dai compares a utilitarian sight to a learning sight. The priest senses that he is drawn “into the life of water, stone, and the language of thunder, birdsong, and the shriek of the mountain sliding down” (p. 273). The term alludes to landslides and floods, which are both related to warming and heavy rainfall in the present climate science along the Himalayan arc. Though not a climactic discourse novel, the images are in tune with the present-day worrying aspects of deforestation, mining corridors and changing water regimes in the Northeast India. Ethically grounded analysis, with attention to ecology, calls for economics to be integrated with limits and caring, and for the damage to sacred places, rivers, species and soils to not be externalized (Washington & Maloney 2020; Zuziak 2016).

Oath of belonging is the answer to possession in the novel. Years later, Gimur gives birth to the land's creation. This recognition turns into an eco-ethical pledge of allegiance: Gimur makes her life a continuation of the hills and winds all around her. This place consciousness is the name given by eco-ethics. It's not about the good old times. It is a practical science that was used at one time to determine the rules of hunting, the time for planting and to preserve groves and rivers. Such orientations answer what ethicists describe as the dilemmas of modern protection: how to value more-than-human life in ways that resist reduction to price alone (Palmer, McShane & Sandler, 2014; Zozulák & Zozuláková, 2022).

The introduction of the novel is a reminder, a promise not to forget the tales of the land, of loss. Tales preserve the names of rivers and hills. They document losses which would otherwise be lost in ledgers. Their open ethic is one that is currently contended by numerous philosophers to be essential to both policy and livelihood as we seek to live well with a changing earth (Attfield 2014; Washington & Maloney, 2020; Zuziak, 2016).

Bridging Environmental Science and Literature

Dai is the author of a novel, which touches upon the sphere of science, and does not lose the grain of the narration. It leads watershed, slope and resource in the scenes that create mirage of the contemporary problem of forests, rivers and land management. In the couple who move all the way to the upper part of the mountains, and close to the source of the Dau River, the home they select is a hydrological kind of home which interprets the valley as catchment and danger rather than a backdrop. River dynamics appear with unsettling clarity: "Waterways changed course and dried up. Men fought and killed each other. Blood flowed" (pp. 71–72). The ties between geomorphology and social rupture, explored by environmental science in terms of sediment loads, bank erosion, and flood regimes, and by literature in terms of lived memory.

In this instance indigenous knowledge is an observing science itself. The novel is a statement of long looks, of marks read between seasons, lives. Monitoring, restraint and reciprocal use is obligatory and not optional, as per the moral that reads "The land is ours, the soul of our fathers" (p. 72), frames monitoring, restraint, and reciprocal use as being obligatory and not optional. Attempts at bridging environmental science and education focus on the use of activity, place, and practice such that terms such as watershed or biodiversity are associated with doing and remembering as opposed to only diagrams (Tal and Abramovitch, 2013; Junker and Jacquemin, 2016). On the pages of Dai, that bridge belongs to the world of the story.

Geological facts, like the presence of mica-laden mountains, can be interpreted as natural beauty and as signs of extractive action as well, and this is where literature and environmental science intersect, which the novel also identifies. It is a beautiful and a diagnostic moment. It foresees the strain called by environmental governance the boundary spanning, in which economic goals, environmental limits, and cultural value are to be bargained at the same level (Posner and Cvitanovic, 2019; Brooks, 2023). Equations are not provided in literature, although the entire boundary remains in sight.

The narrative approach used by Dai is similar to the fieldwork which incorporates measurements and thick description. The priest is attracted to the life of water, stone, language of thunder, birdsong, and the scream of the mountain falling down (p. 273). All hydroclimate, geohazard,

and bioacoustics are brought together in one embodied vision in the sentence. This type of integrative perspective is precisely what design science in the socio-environmental systems demands, in which models co-exist with local indicators, story, and tacit knowledge (Zare et al. 2024).

Conclusion

Black Hill by Mamang Dai demonstrates that the ecological awareness could find its reflection in the literature in the sense that the writer presents the environment as something sacred, alive and not possible to be separated with human life. The novel does not have passive settings such as forests, rivers and mountains but living forces that define identity, memory and survival. Through the journey of its characters, the work exposes the significance of landscape as a site of narration, virtue and ancestral haunting and the significance of nature as a source of survival and a location of spiritual identity.

It has been stated in this paper that the writing of Dai can be seen as the interface between literature and environmental science. Her descriptions of ecological cycles, land use and sacred geography are indicative of the concern surrounding sustainability, biodiversity and optimal use of resources. In the meantime, the wisdom, which is immanent in the novel, the native wisdom, resembles the wisdom of ecological science, which furnishes us with the instruments of life, the modes of living, which are founded on the principles of respect and restraint and continuity. To this extent, the novel does make a positive contribution to the field of environmental humanities, after all, by reminding us that the story is not just a cultural thing, it is an ecological record, too.

Dai's work is pertinent nowadays in the context of the modern world and the changing climate, deforestation and extractive forces. It is explained as the importance of sustainable livelihood, the reverence of the whole ecosystem and to be able to help the native ecosystem ethics. These are not necessarily literature lessons but are practical guidelines as to the societies that are facing environmental calamities.

The novel reveals that there will be greater interdisciplinary research and interaction between the indigenous literature and models for ecological research and policy-development in the future. Such work has the potential to help bring together cultural memory and environmental science in such a way that sustainability and conservation initiatives can be based in both practical knowledge and practical wisdom. Eventually, it is *The Black Hill* that is revealed as the tale one that maintains the ecological memory, the moral conscientiousness, and provides the content on how one can come up with a better relationship between human beings and nature.

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