

Mamang Dai's the Black Hill: A Story from Border Perpetuating Borderland Consciousness

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Abstract: - Every story that was told and the stories that are waiting to be told must have a reason to be told and the reasons must have some genuine intention to get exposed to the readers. The aim of this article is to argue that the understanding of reasons and intensions are an effective methodology to use in investigating the motive of a story. In few cases, the reason turns out to be one's burden that the one has to bring forth it in any form of writing. Sometimes, stories will directly reveal its reason and intension and in some cases the preface of stories will serves as a guide to figure out the reasons and intension. Probing into those reasons will give us a concentrated meaning sewed in the story. By underlining the necessities in understanding the reasons and intensions, this paper attempts to critically examine a story with regard to the writer's reason and intension. For such intensive study, this paper draws a story written from a convulsive place where the reason demands the author to narrate stories. Stories that are told from such state will usually be repulsive or revolutionary. But the fiction, *The Black Hill* by Mamang Dai, focused on this paper is neither repulsive nor revolutionary; instead it serves a greater motive. Surviving at the borderlands of India, touching the boundaries of other great nations, Mamang Dai chooses an 'in-between' place to presents a story of a man and his wife. This paper will study the story within the framework of Gloria Anzaldúa's *Borderlands/ Le Frontera: The New Mestiza* to expose the motive behind the story of the couple..

Keywords

Concentrated meaning, intension, convulsive state, borderlands, in-between.

Robert Frost, in his poem *Mending Wall* states that "...Good fences make good neighbours". In this poem, Frost examines what one can gain or lose in keeping the wall intact. He arrives at the notion that wall is an unnecessary barrier which breaks the laws of natural unity. He lists out a number of reasons to bring the wall down. He summons strange beings to join hands with him. He ironically refers to the ignorance of a man who strives to fix the wall. Frost symbolically represents 'wall' as a man-made barrier between nations, religions, and races inclusive of recently added binaries of gender, language, economy and politics. 'Border' is the politically charged term for the symbolic term wall. Amitav Ghosh calls it as 'Shadow lines' and Benedict Anderson in his work *Imagined Communities* calls it as "feverish imagination" (169). Many scholars have meditated on the term 'border' and most of them arrived at a same point stating that borders are man-made construct which are unnecessary. On the other hand, few writers are writing about people who sacrificed their life in building the borders strong by defending the idea of having walls. This defense and the way of defending and specifically the purpose of defense is the interest of this study by which we can figure out the outcome of such effort.

Globally, this kind of writings addresses nationalism and other serious issues related to border. Conferences after conferences and researches were conducted to define definite borders for the criss-crossing lines drawn on map. But it is controversial because, 'border' does not border one nation but it borders multiple nations. So it is clear that it is a futile effort to discuss border disputes here again, so the paper focuses on the methodology involved in handling these disputes.

In 2010, a conference, titled *Consequences of Long-term Conflicts in Northeast India*, was convened to sort out the problems behind a particular borderland dispute in India. Mr. M.K. Narayanan, Governor of West Bengal, in his keynote address slashes the usual method of portraying and discussing an issue and demands a new methodology to discuss the issue. It sets the standpoint for this paper to deal with one of the India's borderland issues. First part of the paper will discuss the actual problem and the usual method of dealing it. The second part will start with a new perspective stating Mr. Narayanan's demand, followed by a study on *The Black Hill* by Mamang Dai. Finally, the third part of the paper will plant a new consciousness. Most of the borders in India have similar kind of disputes. It is because, India (once) was a large territory but it was

bifurcated into multiple pieces fitting the notion of colonizers' divide and rule policy. Some of the parts of India merged with neighbouring nation or become a separate nation but few of it still struck in controversial state. One among the controversial borders of India lies at the north-east borders. Seven states (Assam, Arunachal Pradesh, Manipur, Meghalaya, Nagaland, Mizoram, and Tripura) at the north-east India mark the borders of India. It lies far away from the mainland and connected to it by a small passage. These states are collectively called as Northeast States. The Northeastern region of India was divided into seven states, "not in the construction of ethnic-racial classifications, but rather in their systematic quantification" (Anderson, 168) and "its border were colonially determined" (171). Hundreds of Tribal and Ethnic communities live at these states. They have internal strives as they try to protect their cultural and community borders. The people living at those states are different from mainlanders in terms of physical appearance and culture. Apart from this, it has geographical, national, political, ethnic and ecological issues.

The north-eastern border of India not only marks the border of India but also it intersects the boundaries of China, Bangladesh, Laos, Thailand, and Burma. The shared boundaries creates ruckus at the borderlands. In 1992, India implemented "Look East" policy to develop trade and military relationship with these two nations. Taking advantage over this policy, these two nations gradually extended its dominance over the borderlands of India. Immigrants and smugglers often infiltrated into these states which raise constant upheavals. It creates "outsider-insider syndrome" (Narayanan, xvi) among northeast Indians which intensifies the sense of belonging over their land. The government of India is aware of the issue but to maintain its relationship with neighbouring nations, it prefers to remain inoperative towards the issue.

Moreover, the Northeastern states of India are still known for its scenic environment. So the Indian Government encroached upon most of the hill areas to preserve ecological balance. So the tribes living on hill cannot expect any sort of support from the government. Besides these issues Narayanan adds few more issues to the list,

Admittedly, the Northeast does suffer from lack of transit facilities which aggravate feelings of isolation. Lack of investment has resulted in an absence of development... lack of governance, fragmentation of political issues... Internal strife and ethnic/caste rivalry..." (xiv).

Number of insurgent groups started to handle this issue, but those groups turned out to be an another threatening force and a new one was started to fix it but eventually it becomes a cyclic process giving birth to a number of insurgent groups. Temsula Ao, a north-east Indian writer, portrays the shams of the insurgents in her Short story *The Letter*. She brings the story by picturing the insurgents' cruel act,

There was an uneasy quiet in the village: the underground extortionists had come and gone and along with them the hard-earned cash the villagers had earned by digging the first alignment for a motorable road to their village. (54) Insurgents living in the hidings live on the money offered by the villagers. They are supposed to be the caretakers but they ill-treat poor villagers to get money. This infuriated the villages and so they decided to "treat them with disrespect and tried to steal from them" (56). One day, a man arrived at the village believing that he can get money from the villagers if he acts like an insurgent. But the furious villagers killed him out of rage. After the death of the disguised man, they found out a letter from his son begging for money to pay his exam fee. Here clashes the humanity and terrorism. So insurgencies, "the so-called 'sympathizers' of the underground forces" (56), are the failed Naxal groups who failed to solve the problem but lead to more. These failed attempts gained the attention of few scholars who organized yearly conference to find out the method of handling the issue. At this juncture, Mr. Narayanan makes a valid point by saying, I hold the view that the practice of 'islanding' the problems of the Northeast, and treating these as totally different from those of the rest of India, could turn out to be counterproductive and counterintuitive... I would urge that the distance between the NE and the rest of India on these counts should not be exaggerated. (xiii). This proclamation of Narayanan was boiled down to a point that the usual method of facing the issue should be changed and a new method should be evolved. They conclude the conference with a blueprint for new method,

It must be emphasized that in all these developments all the ethnic groups of the region have to shift their focus from their monomaniacal preoccupation with their respective ethnic identities by trying to see human relationships from the prisms of what has been described as the more acceptable notion of 'belongings'. (Rajkumar, 27)

Mamang Dai, a Northeast Indian writer, has exercised a new method of projecting the above stated borderland issues of Northeast region which also stands by the suggested norms for new method. Her recently published novel *The Black Hill* (2014) is taken for the study.

As the title of the paper suggests, the story of the novel, *The Black Hill*, is from 'Border'. As per the novel, the black hill is the Border in itself, bordering many communities and nations. To be exact, the novel points out the Mishmee hill that lies 'in-between' Tibet and Arunachal Pradesh. Mamang Dai explains that this border is "India's easternmost road that ends in the wall of mountains delineating the country's international border at the tri-junction with Tiber, China and Myanmar" (290). In China, it was called as Qilinggong Mountains. Again it is hard to define whether the hill falls under the premise of India or Tibet. Many tribal and indigenous communities of Tibet and India, religious propagandists and by-passers claim freehold authority over the hill and have drawn borders on

their own. The focus of this paper is not to decide the border but to study it as it is. The story of the novel is neither about the people of Tibet nor about the people of Northeastern India, but about the settlers and by-passers of the hill.

The story of the novel begins with the introduction of a seventeen year old girl named Gimur whose eyes are focused on the sky waiting for the moon to raise and imbibe her. She belongs to Abor tribe in Mebo village which has rich tradition and ethics to follow. This village is situated at the interior parts of Mishmee hills far-reaching from strangers. She has a blue tattoo on her chin which qualifies her as a part of Mebo Village. She was pampered by her mother, friends and a brother come friend Lendem. She was taught to be a woman who obeys and abides by the beliefs of the community. But Gimur was "...uncontrollable and daring, more like a boy..." (2). She falls in love with a man, Kajinsha, who is from another tribe of Mishmee hill. His tribe is settled at the border of Tibet which was already under the control of China. He was married to an ailing woman from a Tibetan tribe for the sake of developing a good relationship with the tribe. Kajinsha's tribe marks the border of Indian Territory and they are the frontline defense of India. He is aware that his marriage with the Tibetan girl is just a trap by which they crawl slowly into the lands of Indian Territory. Apart from this awaiting internal-feud among tribes, he visited Mebo village to warn them about the strangers' entry into the hill.

The love between Kajinsha and Gimur began to grow strongly as they decided to move to Kajinsha's land crossing the terror of the hill. They gave birth to a twin which was considered to be an ill-omen but the couple strived to change the superstition by living a happy life on the land they own. It is clear as the line says, "All he wanted was his life, his life with Gimur and their newborn son... fall asleep at night without guilt or fear" (115). This dream was shattered with the entry of foreigners, headed by a priest Nicolas Michel Krick, who had their own dreams about the hill. Their aim was to travel through Mishmee hill to reach Tibet to propagate Christianity. Most of the Mishmee tribes agreed to help them by deciding to take them through a wild route which will not reveal the way to tribal settlements. Kajinsha who knows the intricacies of the hill promised to help the determined priest. On their way, they had to face the terror of nature and threats from the tribes they pass by. Though the tribes knew that this priest is harmless, they developed a sense of strangeness, "he is not a soldier. But we have to be alert... He is still a white foreigner - a kla kamplung! Who knows about these people? To us they are all strangers." (78) In land of tribes, the dominant white became the 'other' but they extended their humanity to the priest. When they doubt, they let him starve and when they release his nature, they fed him like God. As promised, Kajinsha took the priest to Tibet. Tibetans supported the priest but at the same time they wanted his to stay away from their land so the Tibetans decided to send him back. Again Kajinsha was assigned to assure his safe return

journey. On the way back, the priest was shot dead by a tribe's man from Tibet. It outraged the British government who ruled India during those days. Since Kajinsha is in-charge of the priest's safety, they doubted that he must be the murderer.

This whole incident was witnessed by Gimur who knows the innocence of Kajinsha. She joined Kajinsha to hide them in the remote place of the hill. But the rival Tibetan tribe betrayed them by revealing their hidings to British soldiers. Eventually, death penalty was leveled on Kajinsha. Gimur returned to the land looking at the sky for she has no hold over the land.

Mamang Dai narrated this story and developed a new consciousness in 289 pages. In addition to this, she has knotted the story with some historical facts used in the story under a separate title, 'author's note'. She says that she could find the facts recorded on the pages of history but "There is another story from an unwritten past hidden beyond the mountain wall." (ix) The novel *The Black Hill* narrates and records the story. Mamang Dai says that the places, the priest character is introduced with the real name and some of the incidents like the priest's journey into the hill and his mysterious death are drawn from the recorded facts. But the fictional characters like Kajinsha and Gimur are the major reason for Dai to narrate the story. In the prologue, she refers to an anonymous woman is orally narrating the story of these couple.

In the prologue to the novel, Mamang Dai, shares her reason of writing this story. She writes, "There are many lost stories in the world and versions that were misplaced yesterday or a thousand years ago"(ix). According to Dai, the story of the priest is a manipulated version of reality and it is her duty to expose the truth to the world and the novel is the result of it. According to the record, the priest's death was mysterious and a tribe's man was charged guilty. It exhibits the brutal nature of the tribes. But they are more than what they are in the constructed history. As one of her characters, Kajinsha, says, "Tell them about us... Tell them we were good. Tell them we also had some things to say. But we cannot read and write. So we tell stories." (288) Each man and woman of every tribe believed that the land is all they have and need, for they are spiritually related to it. They resolve to go to any extent to preserve their land from strangers and neighbours. It is in their instinct and they say, "Trust your instincts. It is the way to survive."(238) They cling on to the border lines and culture because only those things give them the sense of belonging on the earth. It is only their survival instinct that motivates them to preserve their boundaries from strangers and other tribal groups. This is a kind of border instinct seeded in every man living at the border. But Dai is not encouraging this border instinct to grow up to major disputes and betrayal.

The main focus of the novel is not only the unjust death of Kajinsha but also it focuses on the betrayal of tribes. It simply shows how tribes are broken down because of tribal feuds. She promotes unity by focusing tribal disputes. Some

tribesmen practiced marriage as a pact between tribes and in the novel such bond withheld the war between Tibetan tribes and Kajinsha's tribe. Mamang Dai urges the tribal communities to find out some sort of pact which will maintain a good relationship among the groups. Kajinsha is the symbol of unity who sacrificed his life and soul to bring a new consciousness among the tribes. Gloria Anzaldúa calls it as "Borderland Consciousness". This borderland consciousness is a collective consciousness which "break(s) down the unitary aspect of each new paradigm" (80). Here in the novel, each tribe clanged to its own beliefs, so that it was hard for them to secure their borders. If they develop the collective border consciousness by sharing their beliefs, they'll protect their borders and relationship with their neighbours. So the intension behind the whole narration is to develop this new consciousness.

Mamang Dai used story-telling as a new methodology to develop this new consciousness. Melvin Konner says, "...individual minds preserve some private history; it is difficult they could have a collective one without being able to tell it to each other and to their young. All human cultures can, do, and probably must". (1)

As per Konner, 'collective' history can be achieved only by telling stories. This is one of the reasons that made Dai to choose this genre. Brooding over an issue will not be a solution but speaking it out in forms of stories will solve it. Frank states, "Master storytellers know that stories breathe." (4) As a master story teller, Mamang Dai knows that her story will breathe borderland consciousness into the minds of people living all over the world.

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