



ENVISIONING A FEMINIST ECOTOPIA: REIMAGINING GENDER AND NATURE IN MAMANG DAI'S STUPID CUPID

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ABSTRACT

This paper aims to challenge Ecotopia, a term that draws attention to the root word connection between utopia and ecologism. It stresses how important it is to have a healthy relationship with nature in a perfect society where everyone has the same rights. Feminist ecotopia suggests taking apart and rebuilding a green ideal society based on gender. Mamang Dai's ecotopian novel *Stupid Cupid* (2009) looks at how ecologism and utopia are connected. Many parts of this novel organization have an ecotopian feel to them, and the story itself is mostly about making society better. Ideological theories that back materialist and dominating male ideas are challenged and subverted by Dai's idea of paradise and ecology. The paper examines the protagonist's journey from her birthplace in the hills and mountains of Arunachal Pradesh to her new home in Delhi. Adna and her female friends' struggles to adapt to life in the city and her successful establishment of a guest house for friends and lovers sheds light on the challenges women face in navigating ecological spaces and carving out a space for themselves in a male-dominated society.

KEYWORDS: Ecotopia, Utopia, Ecologism, Feminism, Space

INTRODUCTION

Usually, many scholars who believe in the simple separation between realism and utopia say that utopian ideas are flawed, incomplete, or unclear. Utopian thought has grown into a new and better way of thinking about society in a way that goes against what people usually do. The imagination of a utopia is always positive. Ruth Levitas says that utopia is the desire for a better way of life. This kind of optimism comes from the fact that we can imagine things that aren't real and from the fact that we can change the world around us (Ruth 1986 1). Utopia is the act of making a desire. "The Desire Called Utopia and Other Science Fictions" (Nadir 2010 24) is the subtitle of his encyclopedic work *Archaeologies*, which is based on this description of utopia. For the sake of all people and the earth's health, everyone needs to build their utopia (Frazer 1993 38-40). Frazer and Lacey say that "utopian thought is important for breaking the bonds of everyday thinking and imagining alternatives to the social institutions that are causing anguish" (Charan and Gupta 1). A feminist utopia where reality doesn't affect women, and they are free to find out who they are.

The concept of utopia has been a topic of interest for many centuries, with its origins traced back to Thomas More's work *Utopia* (1906). Over time, various forms of utopian consciousness have emerged, the most recent being ecological utopias. "Ecotopia" is an ecologically ideal region or form of society viewed as imaginary. In this context, utopian societies aim to create a holistic image of the city that humanizes the architectural space, ensuring their implementation is possible. The *Ecotopia* (2009), E. Callenbach's work, was unique in that it was built on the territory already inhabited by cities. Consequently, there is a need to describe the mechanisms of building new cities and reorganizing the environment of existing ones to follow the idea of quality and appropriate living spaces.

The term Ecotopia, a contraction of Ecological Utopia, appears to have been coined by anarchist writer Murray Bookchin (Bookchin 1982 14). The ecologically focused utopia addresses various sustainable and holistic issues related to urbanization and community development. It showcases how these issues could be ideally and practically addressed. (18).

Mamang Dai, a journalist and former civil servant from Arunachal Pradesh, is known for her extensive work on the region's culture, tradition, and history. Her novel *Stupid Cupid*, published in 2009, is the subject of a notable study. The story focuses on women from around the Eastern Himalayan Region, including Darjeeling, Siliguri, the entire Terai region, and Arunachal Pradesh. *Stupid Cupid* discusses the changing role of women in modern India, which is influenced by global metropolitan culture and contrasted with the overlooked rural culture. These women face various oppressions based on their race, ethnicity, and gender, both in urban and rural settings. Despite coming from different places, such as Darjeeling, Siliguri, Dimapur, Guwahati, and Itanagar, their shared struggles unite them (Barman 25). Following the country's liberalization, there has been a significant increase in private foreign investment and growth in every sector. However, this growth has come at the expense of many important and diverse ecosystems (Barman 33).

DISCUSSION

The North Eastern Region of India often gets overlooked due to its remote location. These people are separated from the rest of the country due to differences in geographical location, traditions, customs, culture, and rituals. This neglect has led to underdevelopment and lack of opportunities for the people in this region, which is a significant issue that needs to be addressed.

Historically, society has assigned strict gender roles, with the belief that women are incapable of handling certain tasks, such as business. However, Mamang Dai's work challenges this notion and proves that women are equally capable of performing tasks that are typically considered the domain of men. In this novel, Adna, the narrator, highlights the societal perception that women are often regarded as incapable of performing tasks traditionally associated with men. Adna mentions that she has received numerous calls from people who are confused about whether this business is meant for women or not. As Adna received her first call: 'Can I talk to Mr. Adna?' (1) From this, it is clear that people have the same mindset that businesses can handle only men.

Dai highlights the fact that women can be both homely and worldly. This message is exemplified by the main character, Adna, who encounters assumptions about her gender based on her professional abilities. Moving from one place to another place is the everyday life of every human being. People migrate from one state to another for various reasons. The experience of migrating is not enjoyable anymore; it is rather intense and extremely bitter. Adna is a businessperson who left her hometown of Arunachal Pradesh and came to Delhi. She started a business in Delhi. After considering various business ideas, Adna finally decided to follow her instincts and open a guest house for friends and couples. Adna inherits her late aunt's property and plans to renovate it into a beautiful resort for a couple called 'Four Seasons.'

Mamang Dai, a renowned writer, has skillfully captured the essence of not just her hometown, Arunachal Pradesh, but the entire region of northeast India. She paints a vivid picture of the hills, rivers, mountains, and weather of the region while also touching upon the impact of modernization and government projects on the lives of the local people. As people were saying, "Oh, the North-East is a different country altogether." (13)

In Northeast India, women are burdened with daily chores such as carrying firewood and fetching water, while men are responsible for clearing the forest for planting. Everyone follows the routine, and everyone works. The text mentions a woman named Jia, who is not only beautiful but also a hardworking, independent woman. She manages all the household tasks by herself, cooks well, and is kind to everyone.

Jia, Adna's cousin, recently arrived in Delhi to pursue a media refresher course and stay with Adna. With a background in reporting, Jia has always been passionate about writing articles, although she had never traveled outside her region before. Jia has faced hardships in the past, including the tragic loss of her baby at the age of eighteen due to childbirth complications. Her previous husband was irresponsible and abusive, which ultimately led to her baby's death. After leaving him and her village, Jia embarked on a new journey to pursue her dreams. To continue with the marriage, she only seeks respect from her husband. Without it, she is unwilling to continue with the marriage. As Dai writes in her novel:

She could not live with a man she did not respect. She underlined

the word 'respect'. She wrote about issues of public interest, women, religion, and insurgency. (28)

Another female character from Dai's novel is Mareb. Mareb was a frequent patron of a Four-Season guest house and the only child of a wealthy businessman who worked as a contractor. Dai portrays Mareb as the most liberal-minded, who is supposed to enjoy her life. As modernization efforts gained momentum in the state of North East, construction of roads and buildings increased. Timber merchants and businessmen from other areas arrived to take up contracts in the name of local entrepreneurs. Mareb's father, known as "the man with the hat," managed all these operations diligently.

Clear the wild jungle and smash mountains to drag roads across borders so that new settlements with new identities could spring up, inhabited by mixed populations full of new hopes and dreams. (36)

She agrees to marry a man of his father's choice. But she is not willing to live a life like her mother, keeping herself to the four walls of his home and agreeing to every decision of his husband. Mareb's mother was a housewife who obediently followed her husband's every instruction. She was a tribal woman who had married a stranger contractor. Despite her curiosity about reading, she asked for an old magazine when she was admitted to a military field hospital. After marriage, Mareb never saw her mother reading and was not even aware of her interest in any books. Mareb only remembers her mother doing homely things like sewing lace, putting up curtains, and pretending to live a good life. Unfortunately, her mother passed away while she was in her final year of school, and her father remarried. It was clear to Mareb that her father was greedy, which ultimately led her to leave her home forever. Mareb, a woman who defies social norms, leaves her husband to pursue a new life in Delhi and rekindle a relationship with a former lover. The story explores her complex motivations and the role of love in a rapidly changing society.

Dai also presents another woman named Amine in this scene. According to Adna, her close friend Amine is from Jammu but grew up in Shillong because her father worked for ONGC. Her native looks don't seem to bother her. As a response to the idea that Indian marriages are monogamous, she says that marriage does not have emotional depth.

The people from the Northeastern tribes have a similar appearance to the Chinese. As a result, when they try to become part of the larger population in Delhi or other big cities, they often feel insecure and overlooked. This is especially true for the hill tribes in the Northeastern states. These people have experienced the difficulties of being ruled by others and have tried to express their concerns (Taludar 2529). However, the primary challenge lies at the grassroots level, where the people of the North East have faced difficult experiences when attempting to assimilate into mainstream society. Jia, Adna's cousin, recounts one such incident where she faced hostility from a woman in Delhi when trying to hire a cab.

“Hey, you! Jao! JAO! Go back to your own... DESH!” (52)
To which Jia reacts:

How dare you say such a thing? Do you think I’m Chinese, huh? I am Indian....And even if I was Chinese, you have no right to say such a thing to anyone! It’s people like you who create hatred, you know that? (52)

Gayatri Spivak posed a challenge to the Western academy in 1985 by questioning race and class blindness and asking ‘Can the Subaltern Speak?’ According to Edward Said, the descriptions of places were based on the colonizer’s perspective, which he referred to as “fantasies.” Post-colonial studies emerged at the beginning of the twentieth century. Edward Said’s book *Orientalism* (1978) introduced a new approach to postcolonial studies. It suggested that colonialism included a way of speaking and writing about the colonized regions that shaped Western perceptions (Talukdar 2595). The quest for one’s identity and roots has become a significant concern due to the global movement, displacement, and resettlement of people within and outside nations.

There were many problems in northeast India as Dai also talked about some of the social issues, like drug dealing with teenagers, the central government, and being targeted by militant groups. Some towns in the region had turned into junk towns, and everyone was affected in some way.

Some of it had to do with the proximity to the Burma-Laos-Thailand golden triangle, which lay right across the border. But what the papers never fully wrote about was the link between the drug problem and unemployment and the deepening sense of purposelessness that was eating away at our society in the Northeast. (84)

Villagers tried to organize a movement to get rid of this problem, but they failed. The drug peddler uses local boys who want to feed their addictions. Young boys sell anything to buy drugs to fulfill their needs. They stall anything, “They emptied rice bins, stole utensils and pressure cookers and their mother’s tea sets to sell for their next fix.” (85)

One evening, when they had lunch with the minister and his wife, they talked about the Northeast. Adna’s friend asked if we would love to visit the northeast. Is it risky to travel there? The minister replied that the northeast is obviously the safest and most peaceful place. But there is some trouble, Jia said. Minister replied that “the trouble is the Central Government does not listen to us. The Centre does not give us anything except promises.” (113) The Central Government offered them lots of money as a fund. They don’t want that money. All they want is to listen to their problem and try to solve them. As the minister said:

Funds will not solve our problems. The money pouring into the northeastern states is taken out again by middlemen here.... Everyone is involved. That’s why the Centre continues with this scheme. (113)

Northeast was always targeted by the central government; when

they tried to share their problems, the government neglected them. Men from the northeast region were prepared for war; soldiers burned the hills and towns. Women cried for their sons and daughters because the soldiers ate their rice and meat. They shot anyone who tried to argue with them. As Dai highlights through the character of Mrs. Minister, “Everyone is a target. We are the target of militant groups, and we are targeted by drug dealers. No one is saying anything about it, and it’s worse for us women.” (114)

CONCLUSION:

The novel by Dai explores the idea of a better society where everyone is empowered and connected to nature. In this society, women play a leading role in the government, and Dai encourages us to think about our ideal society. The challenges faced by marginalized communities, particularly women in regions like the Eastern Himalayas, as highlighted in Mamang Dai’s *Stupid Cupid*, remind us that the pursuit of utopia must also confront real-world inequalities. In the face of rapid urbanization and environmental degradation, the intersection of feminist and ecological utopias becomes more significant. As we look toward the future, the prospects for utopian thinking remain vital, not as a rigid blueprint but as a dynamic force for reimagining what is possible. By integrating ecological sustainability, social justice, and gender equity, future utopias can serve as critical tools for dismantling oppressive systems and creating spaces where both the earth and its people thrive. Thus, the exploration of utopian ideals, particularly through the lens of Ecotopias, continues to inspire hope for a more equitable and sustainable future.

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