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Cultural Identity and Historical Trauma in the Novels of Mamang Dai

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ABSTRACT: Mamang Dai, an acclaimed Indian author from Arunachal Pradesh, weaves intricate narratives that delve deep into the themes of cultural identity and historical trauma. Her novels, rich in indigenous folklore and history, explore the nuanced experiences of the Adi community and other tribes of the northeastern frontier. This paper examines how Dai's works articulate the struggles of maintaining cultural identity amidst historical upheavals and traumas. Through a close analysis of her selected novels, this study aims to highlight the interplay between identity, conflict, and trauma, shedding light on the resilience and transformation of tribal communities.

I. INTRODUCTION

Mamang Dai, a distinguished literary voice from Arunachal Pradesh, India, has garnered acclaim for her evocative narratives that intricately explore themes of cultural identity and historical trauma. Through her novels, Dai delves into the lives of the Adi tribe and other indigenous communities of the northeastern frontier, presenting a nuanced portrayal of their struggles and resilience. Her works serve as a bridge between the past and the present, capturing the rich oral traditions, myths, and folklore that define the cultural heritage of these communities.

Arunachal Pradesh, with its diverse tribal population and complex history, provides a unique backdrop for Dai's storytelling. The region has witnessed significant historical events, including British colonization, Indian independence, and socio-political upheavals, all of which have profoundly impacted the cultural identities and collective memories of its indigenous people. In this context, Dai's novels offer a profound commentary on the ways in which historical traumas shape individual and collective identities.

This paper aims to explore the representation of cultural identity and historical trauma in Mamang Dai's selected novels. By examining how these elements are interwoven into her narratives, this study seeks to highlight the enduring spirit of the Adi people and their efforts to preserve their cultural heritage amidst external and internal conflicts.

Through a close analysis of her works, this research will shed light on the broader societal issues faced by indigenous communities and the transformative power of storytelling in the process of cultural preservation and healing.

II. BACKGROUND AND CONTEXT

Mamang Dai: A Brief Biography-

Mamang Dai was born in Pasighat, Arunachal Pradesh. She is a member of the Adi tribe and has had a distinguished career as a journalist, civil servant, and author. Her literary works include poetry, short stories, and novels, through which she seeks to preserve and promote the cultural heritage of her community. Dai's writing is deeply influenced by the oral traditions, myths, and folklore of the Adi tribe, which she skillfully weaves into her narratives.

The Adi Tribe and Arunachal Pradesh-

The Adi tribe is one of the largest indigenous communities in Arunachal Pradesh. The Adis have a rich cultural heritage, characterized by their unique customs, traditions, and oral literature. Arunachal Pradesh, located in the northeastern part of India, has a diverse cultural landscape with numerous tribes, each with its own distinct identity. The region has experienced significant historical events, including British colonization, Indian independence, and various socio-political conflicts, all of which have impacted the cultural identities of its indigenous people.

Theoretical Framework-

To analyze the themes of cultural identity and historical trauma in Mamang Dai's novels, this study employs a multifaceted theoretical framework incorporating key concepts from cultural studies, postcolonial theory, and trauma

theory. This framework helps to unpack the complex layers of identity, conflict, and trauma present in Dai's narratives and provides a deeper understanding of the socio-cultural and historical contexts of her works.

Cultural Identity-

Cultural identity is a central theme in Mamang Dai's novels. Stuart Hall's theories on cultural identity offer a valuable lens through which to explore this theme. Hall posits that cultural identity is not a fixed essence but a dynamic, fluid construct shaped by historical, social, and political contexts. He emphasizes the importance of shared history and collective memory in forming cultural identity, suggesting that identity is both a product of the past and a process of continuous transformation.

In the context of Dai's novels, cultural identity is intricately linked to the land, oral traditions, and communal practices of the Adi tribe. The characters' sense of self is deeply rooted in their cultural heritage, which is constantly threatened by external forces such as colonialism and modernization. Hall's framework allows us to examine how these external influences disrupt and reshape the characters' identities, highlighting the ongoing struggle to maintain a sense of cultural continuity amidst change.

Postcolonial Theory-

Postcolonial theory provides another critical perspective for analyzing the themes of identity and trauma in Dai's work. Edward Said's concept of Orientalism and Homi Bhabha's ideas on hybridity and mimicry are particularly relevant. Said's Orientalism examines how colonial powers constructed the East as the 'Other' to justify domination, leading to the marginalization and devaluation of indigenous cultures. Bhabha's theories of hybridity and mimicry explore the ambivalent and contested nature of colonial and postcolonial identities, emphasizing how colonized people negotiate their identities within oppressive structures.

Dai's novels often depict the impact of British colonialism on the Adi tribe, portraying how colonial narratives and power dynamics disrupt traditional ways of life. The characters' experiences reflect the tensions between preserving indigenous culture and adapting to colonial influences. Postcolonial theory helps to uncover these dynamics, illustrating how Dai's characters navigate their identities in the face of historical oppression and cultural dislocation.

Historical Trauma-

Historical trauma refers to the cumulative emotional and psychological wounding experienced by a community over generations due to significant historical events such as colonization, war, and forced displacement. Maria Yellow Horse Brave Heart's concept of historical trauma is instrumental in understanding how these collective experiences affect individuals and communities across generations.

In Dai's novels, historical trauma manifests in the characters' lives as they grapple with the legacies of colonization and cultural disruption. Brave Heart's framework highlights the intergenerational transmission of trauma, showing how past events continue to influence the present. This perspective is crucial for analyzing the deep-seated pain and resilience depicted in Dai's narratives, as characters struggle to heal from the wounds of history while striving to preserve their cultural identity.

The Role of Storytelling-

Storytelling is a recurring motif in Mamang Dai's work, serving as a vital tool for preserving cultural identity and addressing historical trauma. Walter Benjamin's theories on storytelling and collective memory provide insight into this aspect of Dai's novels. Benjamin suggests that storytelling is a communal act that preserves and transmits cultural knowledge and collective memory, helping communities to make sense of their experiences and sustain their identities.

In Dai's novels, storytelling acts as a means of cultural preservation and resistance against historical erasure. The oral traditions and myths of the Adi tribe, recounted by characters within the narratives, reinforce their cultural identity and provide a source of strength and continuity. Benjamin's framework underscores the importance of storytelling in Dai's work, illustrating how it functions as a form of cultural resilience and a means of healing from historical trauma.

Intersectionality-

Kimberlé Crenshaw's concept of intersectionality also enriches the theoretical framework, highlighting how various social identities such as ethnicity, gender, and class intersect to shape individual and collective experiences. In Dai's novels, the intersection of these identities is evident as characters navigate the complexities of cultural identity and historical trauma. Intersectionality helps to reveal the layered and multifaceted nature of these experiences, emphasizing how different aspects of identity interact to influence the characters' lives.

III. ANALYSIS OF SELECTED NOVELS

1. "The Legends of Pensam"

"The Legends of Pensam" is one of Mamang Dai's most celebrated works. The novel is set in the fictional village of Pensam, which means "in-between" in the Adi language. This "in-betweenness" symbolizes the liminal space where the characters navigate their cultural identity and historical traumas.

Cultural Identity: The novel vividly portrays the Adi tribe's cultural practices, rituals, and beliefs. Through characters like Hoxo, who is deeply connected to the oral traditions, Dai highlights the importance of storytelling in preserving cultural identity. The legends and myths recounted by the characters serve as a repository of collective memory, reinforcing their sense of belonging.

Historical Trauma: The novel also delves into the historical traumas experienced by the Adi community, particularly during the British colonial period and subsequent political changes. The narrative reflects on the loss of traditional lands, the impact of external influences, and the internal conflicts arising from these changes. Characters like Doye and Yapi embody the intergenerational transmission of trauma, as they grapple with the legacy of past events while trying to forge a future.

2. "Stupid Cupid"

"Stupid Cupid" is a departure from Dai's usual themes, focusing on contemporary issues faced by urban dwellers. However, it still touches upon the themes of identity and displacement.

Cultural Identity: The protagonist, Adna, is a young woman from Arunachal Pradesh living in Delhi. Her struggles with cultural identity are evident as she navigates the challenges of maintaining her indigenous roots while adapting to urban life. The novel explores the tension between tradition and modernity, highlighting the fluid nature of cultural identity in a globalized world.

Historical Trauma: Although the novel is set in a contemporary urban context, the characters' experiences are still influenced by historical traumas. Adna's sense of displacement and alienation in the city reflects the broader historical context of migration and loss of cultural roots.

3. "The Black Hill"

"The Black Hill" is another significant work by Mamang Dai that explores the themes of identity and historical trauma. The novel is set against the backdrop of the 19th-century British expedition into the tribal areas of Arunachal Pradesh.

Cultural Identity: The novel delves deep into the cultural practices and beliefs of the Adi tribe. The characters' connection to their land and traditions is a central theme, reflecting their strong cultural identity. The narrative portrays the Adi people's resilience in the face of external threats and their determination to preserve their cultural heritage.

Historical Trauma: The novel addresses the impact of British colonialism on the Adi tribe. The intrusion of British forces into their land and the subsequent conflicts result in significant trauma for the community. The characters' experiences reflect the broader historical trauma of colonization, displacement, and cultural erosion. The novel also explores the intergenerational transmission of trauma, as the characters grapple with the legacy of past events.

IV. THEMES AND MOTIFS

The Role of Storytelling-

Storytelling plays a crucial role in Mamang Dai's novels, serving as a means of preserving cultural identity and transmitting collective memory. The oral traditions of the Adi tribe are woven into the narratives, highlighting the importance of stories in maintaining a sense of continuity and belonging. Through storytelling, the characters connect with their past, reaffirm their cultural identity, and find strength to face the present and future.

Conflict and Resilience-

Conflict is a recurring theme in Dai's novels, reflecting the historical and contemporary challenges faced by the Adi community. Whether it is the external conflict with colonial forces or the internal conflict arising from cultural changes, the characters' resilience in the face of adversity is a testament to their strength and determination. Dai's portrayal of conflict and resilience underscores the enduring spirit of the Adi people and their ability to adapt and survive.



The Intergenerational Impact of Trauma:

Dai's novels often explore the intergenerational impact of trauma, showing how the experiences of one generation influence the next. The characters' struggles with identity and belonging are shaped by the historical traumas endured by their ancestors. By highlighting the continuity of trauma and its effects on subsequent generations, Dai emphasizes the need for healing and reconciliation.

V. CONCLUSION

Mamang Dai's novels provide a rich tapestry of cultural identity and historical trauma, offering valuable insights into the experiences of the Adi community and other indigenous tribes of Arunachal Pradesh. Through her evocative storytelling, Dai captures the complexities of navigating cultural identity amidst historical upheavals and traumas. Her works underscore the importance of preserving cultural heritage, acknowledging past traumas, and fostering resilience in the face of adversity. By examining the interplay between identity, conflict, and trauma in Dai's novels, this paper sheds light on the broader societal issues faced by indigenous communities and the enduring power of storytelling as a means of cultural preservation and healing.

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