



The River as a Witness: Indigenous Knowledge and Cultural Identity in Mamang Dai's *Small Towns and the River*

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Abstract— Mamang Dai's poem evokes the timeless bond between her people and their homeland. Flowing through the lines is the perpetual river, symbol of enduring ties between the living and those passed on. Its waters reflect facets of existence entwined with the natural realm and spirit world, as generations arise and find rest in an eternal cycle. Towns dotted along shorelines witness this ongoing rhythm, community born again each spring as life stirs and revives. Though scripts now capture her verses, the essence remains unchanged tradition flows as constant, oral legends and written word joining to convey ancestral wisdom through the ages. Dai's reflection on the existential musings of Indigenous communities speaks to their profound interconnectedness with the natural order. This poem investigates how a poem safeguard inherited insight, emphasizing the sustaining role of Indigenous literature as a living repository of collective remembrance and a people's source of themselves.



Keywords— Indigenous, mortality, spirituality, Tradition, wisdom

I. INTRODUCTION

Indigenous works act as a significant conduit for safeguarding ancestral tales, vocal customs, and knowledge bases. Mamang Dai, a notable bard from Arunachal Pradesh, crafts verse heavily grounded in the traditions and ideologies of Northeast India's original inhabitants. Her poem *Small Towns and the River* gifts a profound reflection on being, perishing, and religion, placed inside the scenery of her local geography. Rivers hold significance for spiritual practices and sustaining life, just as storytelling traditions strengthen cultural identities across generations. While change alters landscapes over time, the eternal human experiences of birth, love, community, and passing on remain universal through art like Dai's lyrical meditation on the connections between land and people. The river flows as both a constant and changeable presence across time, observing yet untouched by human joys and sorrows along its banks. In Dai's poem, its waters reflect not only the physical landscape but also

the deeper currents of tribal spirituality, mythology, and character that sustain cultural roots. The simple words capture profound insight, preserving for future eyes a glimpse into the collective Indigenous soul where literature and identity intertwine as intimately as the reeds along the shore.

II. THE RIVER AS A CULTURAL AND SPIRITUAL METAPHOR:

The winding river cuts through the valley, its waters speaking of all they've seen. Small towns clung to its banks like a memory refusing to fade, permanent though people come and go. Dai wandered those familiar streets where joy and grief in equal measure had walked, seeing in each stone and wall an echo of generations past. The poet's mind turned, as the seasons turned, to deeper matters of nature's constancy amid the swift passage of mortal days, of traditions that outlived even the towering pines.

And in the flowing of the river, ever now yet always was, a lesson for all who stop to listen: that some things transcend even time itself.

The soulful river flows through the poem, its sentient waters holding centuries of memory and meaning. Dai writes that *the river knows, stretching past the town*, seeing and sensing in a way that evokes Indigenous perspectives of nature's animate spirit. From one generation to the next, the guarding river bears witness, its discernment and omniscience reflecting the cosmologies of local Indigenous peoples. For them, living landscapes like this river hold inherent life force and agency, voices and visions that speak across the ages. Here, then, a single river embodies the long tradition of a land and its people, past and present flowing together as one living story.

The poem likens the river to a torrent of grief, embodying nature with human emotion. Its sorrow mirrors the sadness of Indigenous peoples forced to abandon ancestral lands and traditions. Witnessing dispossession and dissolution of their culture through colonial expansion, urban growth, and modernization, communities experienced deep mourning. Both the powerful flowing of water and heavy hearts of those displaced cut deeply through the terrain. Its melancholic course reflects their bleak loss of what once was and collective struggles to preserve remaining ties to who they are amid changing tides. The statement *sometimes, I think it holds its breath seeking a land of fish and stars* alludes to a desire for a pristine, unspoiled life and may be a metaphor for the Indigenous way of life that is in danger of disappearing due to outside influences.

In addition, the poem's depiction of rituals highlights how cultural traditions endure despite the fleeting nature of life and death. *Life and death, life and death, / only the rituals are permanent*, Dai notes, highlighting the notion that rites and customs act as pillars for Indigenous societies. Death rituals in many tribal societies include directing the deceased soul toward the afterlife, as exemplified by the line, *The dead are placed pointing west. When the soul rises it will walk into the golden east, into the house of the sun*. The eastward orientation, which is symbolic of rebirth and divinity, reflects Indigenous mythologies that surround the sun as a deity and the final destination for departed souls.

As the poet puts it, *In small towns by the river we all want to walk with the gods*. This emphasizes the shared desire for spiritual transcendence. The Indigenous belief in coexistence with divine energies and the desire of balance between the spiritual and human realms are summed up in this sentence. In spite of contemporary concerns about the future, *the cool bamboo, restored in sunlight*, symbolizes

rebirth and continuity, highlighting the tenacity of Indigenous customs. Bamboo, traditionally a sign of strength and flexibility in Indigenous cultures, is represented as thriving in the sunlight, symbolizing the ways in which Indigenous identities continue and grow despite historical and contemporary challenges.

Small towns' concern is also conveyed by Dai in the line, *Small towns grow with anxiety for the future*. The conflict between tradition and modernity, which is a major issue for Indigenous tribes trying to preserve their cultural identity in a world that is changing quickly, is reflected in this passage. The poem makes the argument that although material change is unavoidable, the spiritual and cultural foundation of Indigenous life embodied in nature, oral traditions, and rituals remains strong and sacred. A major issue in Indigenous writing is the conflict between continuity and change, where the past is constantly reinterpreted in the present rather than lost.

III. CONCLUSION

Mamang Dai's *Small Towns and the River* is an in-depth reflection on Indigenous identity, awareness of the environment, and the spirituality ingrained in tribal cultures. The poem's use of the river motif describes the connection between human existence and nature, revealing the perspectives of Indigenous peoples that regard the land and its elements as sacred. Dai's work emphasizes the importance of poetry as a means of passing on ancestral wisdom, ensuring that Indigenous knowledge systems endure in a world that is changing quickly. By preserving cultural narratives and spiritual traditions through literature, *Small Towns and the River* adds to the larger conversation on Indigenous representation and resistance, as well as the value of storytelling in maintaining tribal heritage.

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