

International Journal of Engineering, Science and Humanities

An international peer reviewed, refereed, open access journal
Impact Factor: 8.3 www.ijesh.com ISSN: 2250 3552

Indigenous Folklore, Mythic Consciousness, and Cultural Memory in Mamang Dai's The Sky Queen and Once Upon a Moontime

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Abstract

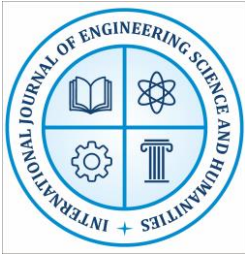
Contemporary Indian English literature from the Northeast has emerged as a vital site for the articulation of indigenous epistemologies and cultural memory. Mamang Dai's writings exemplify this literary shift by foregrounding folklore, oral traditions, and tribal cosmologies rooted in the lived experiences of the Adi community of Arunachal Pradesh. This paper examines *The Sky Queen* and *Once Upon a Moontime* through the critical framework of folklore studies to analyse how Dai reconfigures myth, orality, and ecological consciousness within literary discourse. The study argues that Dai's texts function as counter-archives that resist colonial historiography and cultural homogenization by preserving indigenous worldviews in narrative and poetic forms. Through close textual analysis, this paper demonstrates that Dai's engagement with folklore is not merely representational but epistemological, offering alternative ways of understanding history, identity, and human–nature relationships. The research positions Dai as a significant contributor to indigenous literary resistance and folklore-based knowledge production in postcolonial India.

Keywords: Mamang Dai; Folklore Studies; Indigenous Cosmology; Oral Tradition; Northeast Indian Literature; Myth; Cultural Memory

Introduction

Folklore occupies a foundational position in indigenous societies, serving as a living archive of communal memory, belief systems, and ethical frameworks. Unlike written histories that prioritize linear chronology and documented evidence, folklore operates through oral transmission, symbolic narration, and ritual performance. In the context of Northeast India—a region marked by ethnic plurality and rich oral traditions—folklore becomes an essential medium through which communities preserve their cultural identity.

Mamang Dai, an eminent writer from Arunachal Pradesh, has consistently drawn upon the oral narratives and mythic imagination of the Adi tribe to construct a distinctive literary voice. Her works challenge the marginalization of tribal cultures within mainstream Indian literature by



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foregrounding indigenous epistemologies. *The Sky Queen* and *Once Upon a Moontime* exemplify Dai's sustained engagement with folklore as both subject and method.

This paper seeks to explore how Dai's texts employ folklore to reimagine history, identity, and cosmology. Situating the analysis within folklore studies and postcolonial criticism, the study examines how myth, oral storytelling patterns, and ecological symbolism function as narrative strategies. The paper argues that Dai's literary reworking of folklore resists cultural erasure while asserting the continued relevance of indigenous knowledge systems.

Folklore Studies and Indigenous Epistemology: A Theoretical Context

Folklore studies emphasize the communal, performative, and dynamic nature of traditional narratives. Alan Dundes conceptualizes folklore as informal cultural expression shared within a community, highlighting its collective ownership. In indigenous contexts, folklore is inseparable from daily life, shaping social relations, environmental ethics, and spiritual practices.

Orality is central to folklore, as articulated by Walter J. Ong, who distinguishes oral consciousness from literate modes of thought. Oral cultures rely on memory, repetition, and rhythmic patterns, elements that are evident in Dai's narrative and poetic techniques. Her writing replicates the cadence of oral storytelling, thereby preserving its performative quality within textual form.

Myth criticism further enriches this framework. Mircea Eliade defines myths as sacred narratives that provide explanatory models for existence and cosmology. In Dai's works, myth is not a relic of the past but an active epistemological structure that shapes contemporary understanding. By embedding mythic consciousness into modern literature, Dai contests Western rationalist paradigms that often dismiss indigenous belief systems.

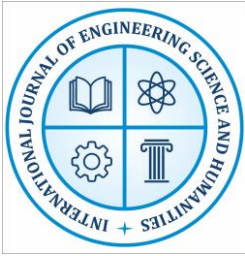
Research Methodology

This study adopts a qualitative and interpretive methodology grounded in close textual analysis. The primary texts under examination are Mamang Dai's *The Sky Queen* and *Once Upon a Moontime*. Folklore motifs, mythic archetypes, narrative voice, and symbolic imagery are analysed to identify patterns of indigenous storytelling.

Secondary sources include foundational works in folklore theory, postcolonial studies, and scholarship on Northeast Indian literature. A comparative approach is employed to examine how both texts engage with folklore across different genres. MLA 9th edition guidelines are followed for documentation and citation.

Myth, Orality, and Feminine Cosmology in *The Sky Queen*

The Sky Queen draws extensively from Adi creation myths and cosmological narratives, foregrounding a feminine divine presence central to the origin of life and cosmic order. The titular *Sky Queen* embodies fertility, authority, and balance, challenging patriarchal mythic traditions prevalent in Western narratives.



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The text reflects oral storytelling conventions through episodic narration and symbolic repetition. Rather than following a linear plot, the narrative unfolds in cycles, mirroring mythic temporality. This non-linear structure reflects an indigenous understanding of time as regenerative rather than progressive.

Nature functions as a sentient force within the narrative. Rivers, forests, and celestial elements possess agency, reflecting animistic beliefs integral to tribal folklore. Such representation disrupts anthropocentric narratives and reinforces an ecological worldview rooted in coexistence and reciprocity.

Poetic Reinscription of Folklore in *Once Upon a Moontime*

Once Upon a Moontime employs poetic form to reimagine folk narratives and ancestral memories. The recurring image of the moon symbolizes cyclical time, femininity, and continuity—concepts deeply embedded in indigenous cosmology. Lunar imagery aligns with ritual calendars and agricultural cycles central to tribal life.

The poems exhibit oral rhythms through repetition and incantatory language, transforming written poetry into a performative act. Spirits, ancestors, and natural forces coexist within the poetic landscape, dissolving the boundary between the material and metaphysical worlds.

The collective voice of the poems foregrounds communal memory over individual experience, reinforcing folklore's shared nature. By privileging collective consciousness, Dai resists the individualism characteristic of Western literary traditions.

Comparative Folkloric Dynamics in the Two Texts

While *The Sky Queen* adopts a narrative mode rooted in mythic storytelling, *Once Upon a Moontime* offers a lyrical engagement with folklore. Despite formal differences, both texts emphasize oral tradition, ecological symbolism, and ancestral presence.

The feminine principle emerges as a unifying motif, reflecting indigenous gender paradigms that accord spiritual authority to women. Dai's adaptation of folklore across genres demonstrates its flexibility and continued relevance. Importantly, Dai avoids the exoticization of tribal culture. Her texts present folklore as lived reality rather than anthropological spectacle, thereby resisting folklorization.

Folklore as Cultural Resistance and Identity Formation

Dai's use of folklore constitutes an act of cultural resistance. Writing indigenous narratives in English enables her to reach a global readership while subverting colonial linguistic hierarchies. English becomes a medium for preserving, rather than erasing, tribal identity.

Folklore in Dai's works challenges dominant national histories that marginalize indigenous experiences. By centering Adi cosmology, she reclaims narrative authority and asserts the legitimacy of indigenous knowledge systems.



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Additionally, the ecological ethics embedded in folklore offer alternative perspectives in an era of environmental crisis. Dai's texts underscore the relevance of indigenous ecological wisdom in contemporary discourse.

Conclusion

This study demonstrates that Mamang Dai's *The Sky Queen* and *Once Upon a Moontime* function as literary interventions that preserve and reinterpret indigenous folklore. Through mythic imagination, oral narrative strategies, and ecological consciousness, Dai constructs counter-histories that challenge colonial and mainstream literary paradigms.

From a folklore studies perspective, Dai's works reaffirm the vitality of oral traditions and their capacity to adapt within written literature. Her writing not only safeguards cultural memory but also articulates indigenous epistemologies as viable frameworks for understanding the world. Consequently, Dai occupies a significant position in postcolonial indigenous literature, where folklore becomes a mode of resistance, survival, and cultural continuity.

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