https://doi.org/10.65734/tgi.ssei.avp.ijcsss.ti.26.29.11

Indigenous Relational Ontology and *Zoe*-Centered Life in *The Black Hill* by Mamang Dai

Chunindia Salam

Abstract

The paper examines Mamang Dai's *The Black Hill* through the lens of Indigenous relational ontology and explores its points of resonance with Rosi Braidotti's concept of *zoe*. Set within the historical context of nineteenth-century Arunachal Pradesh, the novel presents a worldview that challenges colonial and anthropocentric understandings of existence. By exploring the relational structures embedded within Adi-Mishmi cosmologies, the paper argues that *The Black Hill* imagines life as a network of interdependent relations. Rather than reading Indigenous cosmologies through posthumanist theory alone, the paper considers how they offer distinctive ways of conceptualizing life, agency, and existence beyond the human. In doing so, it demonstrates how Northeast Indian literature contributes to broader discussions of relationality and expands contemporary understandings of the posthuman.

Keywords: Coloniality, Indigenous ontology, Posthumanism, Relationality, Terristory, *Zoe*

Introduction

Mamang Dai's *The Black Hill* (2014) is a semi-historical novel based on the nineteenth-century encounter with the French missionary Father Nicolas Kirck and the Indigenous communities of present-day Arunachal Pradesh. Drawing upon archival history as well as Indigenous cultural memory, the novel revisits a colonial contact zone in which competing understanding of knowledge, belief and existence come into contact. While rooted in a specific historical moment, the novel's significance extends beyond its reconstruction of the past. Through its representations of land, storytelling, animals, spirits and community life, *The Black Hill* foregrounds Indigenous

ways of understanding the world that challenge colonial assumptions about humanity, knowledge and civilization.

This paper argues that *The Black Hill* articulates an indigenous relational ontology, a worldview in which humans, land, animals, ancestors, and spirits participate within an interconnected field of relations, and that this ontology enters into productive dialogue with Rosi Braidotti's posthumanist concept of *zoe*. The paper's central contention is that this dialogue illuminates both frameworks precisely because it does not fatten their differences. *Zoe* emerges from a philosophical critique of European humanism, whereas the relational worldview in Dai's novel is grounded in the lived cosmologies and ecological practices of Adi and Mishmi communities; distinct peoples whose shared geographical space has produced historically adjacent but not identical traditions. Critically, the novel embodies this difference structurally, Gimur belongs to the Adi (Abor) community and Kajinsha to the Mishmi. Their relationship is a literary staging of the encounter between two distinct indigenous ontologies, a literary extension beyond their love story. They each have their own relationship to land, story and the non-human world. The value of comparison with *zoe* lies in recognizing resonances between these frameworks and *zoe*, not in assimilating any of them into the other.

Existing scholarship on the novel has examined its engagement with oral traditions, Indigenous knowledge systems, cultural identity and the relationship between land and narrative. Ananyaa and Kayak (2025), drawing on Warren Cariou's concept of *territory*, demonstrates how Dai privileging oral traditions and animistic worldviews that resist hegemonic epistemologies and reaffirm indigenous sovereignty. Preha et al. (2025) applied Stuard Hall's theory of cultural identity to trace how Adi identity specifically is reshaped through colonial power while remaining dynamically resilient. Patel (2025) reads Dai's work through a framework of eco-spirituality, arguing that her fiction presents nature as both physical reality and sacred presence. Significantly, Ananyaa and Nayak (2025) also argued that Dai's act of 'writing orality' which is to translate oral traditions and indigenous worldviews into written literary form, is itself a form of territory: an act of asserting indigenous epistemic sovereignty through the very medium associated with colonial authority (83).

These studies collectively establish that not only does *The Black Hill* describe indigenous life but enacts it, making the novel's form inseparable from

its argument. The present paper builds on this foundation by foregrounding the ontological implications of these relationships, the formal choice through which they are expressed, and the ways in which the novel imagines life beyond human-centered frameworks.

Colonialism as an Ontological Project

In *The Black Hill* Mamang Dai explores colonialism not only as a political or economic phenomenon but as an ontological project, where there exists a systematic attempt to reorganize reality according to a set of hierarchical distinctions. The arrival of father Kirck introduces a worldview grounded in Christianity, literary and institutional authority that assumes its categories are universal and therefore capable of explaining other cultures and societies. These categories often present themselves in dual categories – civilized/uncivilized, between believer/pagan, knowledge/superstition. Not only do these dual classifications determine not only how indigenous communities are perceived but also determines whether they can be recognized as fully human.

Frantz Fenon in *Black Skin, White Mask* (1952), argues that colonial discourse produces the colonial subject through narratives of inferiority, positioning them outside the dominant definitions of civilization. The category of 'savage' as Dai shows in the novel is used to describe the Adi and Mishmi people, revealing less about indigenous communities and more about the worldview that seeks to define them. As Francesca Ferrando observes, "Humanism has historically defined the human through a series of oppositional binaries, such as human/animal, human/machine, man/woman, and culture/nature," privileging a specific model of the human as the measure of all things (Ferrando 27). Rosi Braidotti similarly argues that "the human of Humanism is a historically specific figure," constructed through exclusions based on race, gender, and other differences (Braidotti 13). These assumptions were inherited and extended by colonial discourses through missionary and civilizing projects of the kind Father Kirck embodies.

Edward Said's critique of representation in *Orientalism* (1978) is equally relevant here. Said argues that colonial discourse does not simply describe the "O ther' but actively produces knowledge about it, making the colonized the subject of interpretation, classification and textual representation from a single point of view. This dynamic is visible throughout the history surrounding Father Kirck and Kajinsha. Dai's project is partly one of recovering histories

that were ignored, distorted or silenced within colonial records. Near the end of the novel, Kajinsha's plea, "Tell them we were good. Tell them we also had some things to say. But we cannot read and write. So, we tell stories" (Dai 182) positions storytelling as an alternative archive and as a form of cultural sovereignty outside the structure of colonial documentation.

The novel also shows that privilege of writing constitutes one of the most important aspects of colonial ontology as they associate writing with permanence and truth, while oral traditions are frequently dismissed as unreliable or primitive. Walter Mignolo in *Local Histories/Global Designs: Coloniality, Subaltern Knowledges and Broader Thinking* (2000), argues that colonial systems establish hierarchies of knowledge in which western epistemologies are privileged while other forms of knowledge are marginalized. Ananyaa and Nayak (2025) demonstrates this dynamic in their reading of *The Black Hill*, showing how colonial alignment of writing with legitimacy and truth and of orality with the illiterate and the uncivilized, amounts to a form of epistemic violence with tangible material consequences for indigenous communities. The tension between writing and orality surfaces in Gimur's encounter with the spelling book, in Zumsha's refusal to accept Kirck's letter of safe conduct and in Kajinsha's declaration that "the land is our book" (Dai 92). Kajinsha's statement that relocates epistemic authority from written scripture to lived relational knowledge.

Adi and Mishmi Ontologies in The Black Hill

Before turning to the dialogue between indigenous relational ontology and *zoe*, it is important to acknowledge a distinction he novel itself insists upon: the Adi and Mishmi communities are not the same, their cosmologies while sharing broader relational structures, are distinct. Gimur belongs to the Adi (also called Abor, a term Dai rejects herself as colonial and decretory) community of the Mebo village. Kajinsha is a Mishmi chief from the hills near the Tibetan border. Their elopement is an act that violates the deep taboo against intertribal relationships, it is described as a "betrayal to the community" (Dai 35). It signals that the novel is not presenting a unified indigenous world but a contact zone between two different indigenous worlds, each with its own territorial, spiritual and social logic.

Perha et al. (2025) focus their analysis on the Adi identity specifically tracing its linguistic, spiritual, political and cultural dimensions through

Stuart Hall's framework. They note that the Adi community's spiritual life is centered on Donyi-Polo, the sun moon deity and on an animistic faith woven around forest and ecology and co-existence with the natural world (Patel 5). The Adi relationship to land is expressed through a cosmology in which the forest, rivers and mountains are active participants in community life, bearers of ancestral memory and sites of ritual responsibility. Patel notes that the Adi worldview, "human beings do not occupy center stage" but exist within a sacred ecology in which all beings hold intrinsic worth (Patel 2).

The Mishmi cosmology that shapes Kajinsha's world, while sharing this broad relational orientation, carries its own specific structures. Ananyaa and Nayak draws primarily on Idu Mishmi epistemologies, showing how the Mishmi relationship to land and animals is governed by animistic ontological credence that attributes intentionality, consciousness and moral agency to more-than-human members of the landscape (Ananyaa and Nayak 80).Aiyadurai's research demonstrates that the Mishmi community's relationship to wildlife which are governed by taboos, ritual obligations and the recognition of animals as kin, is grounded in a specific ecology that differs from Adi practice in its particular articulations, even while sharing a broadly relational structure (Aiyadurai 7-8).

Dai navigates this difference with considerable care. Rather than merging these two cosmologies into a single indigenous worldview, she uses the relationship between Gimur and Kajinsha to stage their encounter. Gimur carries the Adi world in its oral traditions, its serpent stories, its relationship to the Mebo landscape. Kajinsha carries the Mishmi world, with its relationship to the Tibetan borders, its Mithun ceremonies and its hunting taboos. When Kajinsha kills a snake in the journey to his home, the transgression is interpreted through Gimur's Adi serpent cosmology, but the consequence falls within the Mishmi relational order. The scene thus operates at the intersection of two distinct indigenous epistemologies rather than within one.

Indigenous Relational Ontology and *Zoe* Centered Life

Having mapped the specific grounds and distinctions between the Adi and Mishmi relational ontology the paper can now turn to their resonances with Rosi Braidotti's concept of *zoe*. These resonances are real and illuminating, but they do not override the differences already established. The dialogue between

indigenous relational ontology and posthumanist theory is productive precisely because it does not require either framework to become the other.

Kajinsha's declaration that "the land is our book" (Dai 92) provides the clearest expression of the Mishmi relational ontology at the heart of the novel. The full passage warrants close attention:

Not only does this statement reject colonial epistemologies, it produces a fundamentally different understanding of what knowledge is how it is produced. Knowledge here emerges through dwelling, observation, memory and long-term relationship with the land. Here, the land is not a passive object but an active repository of knowledge and communication. As Ananyaa and Nayak observe through the framework of terristory, land itself becomes scripture, a living repository of knowledge, and reading the land emerges as indigenous epistemic practice that resists colonial imposition (Ananyaa and Nayak 79). The land functions as what Warren Cariou calls "the ground of culture", a dynamic living, relational medium in which indigenous communities not only survive but flourish.

The relational worldview presented in the novel is not confined to epistemology alone but reflects a broader ontology in which human beings are not separate from nature but are one of the many interconnected beings that co-inhabit a sentient world. Ananyaa and Nayak demonstrate that amidst relational ontology integral to Mishmi community life creates a worldview that perceives animals and more-than-human entities as possessing intentionality, consciousness, and moral agency (80). The animistic faith of the Adi community, as Patel notes, is similarly "woven around forest ecology and co-existence within the natural world' presenting a society whose spiritual life is inseparable from its environment (Patel 5). Kajinsha's words, "We belong to the land. The land is a good mother. I take only what I need. Animals and trees offer themselves. We help each other survive" (Dai 92) articulates a relationship of reciprocity and mutual obligation between humans and the more-than-human world that is simultaneously ethical, spiritual and ecological.

In *The Posthuman* (2013), Braidotti distinguishes *zoe* from humanist understandings of life centered on the autonomous rational subject. *Zoe* refers to the generative force of life itself. It functions as "the dynamic, self-organizing structure of life itself" (Braidotti 60), encompassing all living

matter. While emerging from different intellectual traditions, both *zoe* and the relational ontology presented in *The Black Hill* challenge the anthropocentric assumptions that position the human above the rest of existence. In both frameworks, humans are participants within larger networks of life rather than sovereign masters of them.

Yet the distinction between these frameworks is as important as this resonance. *Zoe* emerges from a critique of European humanism, its genealogy runs through Deleuze, Spinoza, and feminist materialism. The relational ontology of Adi and Mishmi communities, by contrast, is grounded in specific histories, oral traditions, cosmologies, and ecological practices stretching back across generations of co-habitation with particular landscape. It is not an abstract philosophical principle but a lived and situated way of being.

Animals, Spirits and the Serpent Narrative

The novel's treatment of animals and spirits provides the most textually specific demonstrations of this relational ontology inaction. Ananyaa and Nayak emphasizes that the territory articulated in *The Black Hill* unfolds through stories embedded in physical features of the landscape; stories that are more than descriptions of the landscape; stories that not only provides the description of the land but also of what inhabits it, transforming geographical features into storied sites that guide behavior and bear witness to ethical relationships with the more-than-human world (Ananyaa and Nayak 82). Two scenes are particularly significant: the narrative of the serpent spirit *Biribik*, and the cultural significance of the Mithun.

The *Biribik* scene unfolds through the convergence of mythical and historical time. During their journey, Kajinsha kills a snake without hesitation. Shortly afterwards, Gimur, seated beside a river, is transported by the sight of the water into memories of childhood stories about a serpent spirit dwelling in deep water, angered by the killing of her children. Her internal reflection accounts, "There is always a serpent spirit lurking in deep water...The snake is angry because her children have been killed by men and she wants revenge" (Dai 59). One of the twin children born to Gimur and Kajinsha dies during childbirth. As Ananyaa and Nayak argue, the novel here collapses the binary between mythical time and historical time, transforming the serpent's vengeance from a mythic motif to a lived consequence. Kajinsha's act of killing the snake is an act of transgression against the more-than-human relational

order, and that order responds (Ananyaa and Nayak 81). In the novel this supernaturalism translates to a lived reality.

Significantly, this scene also illustrates the intersection of the two cosmologies the novel holds in dialogue. The serpent memory is Gimur's and belongs to the Adi oral tradition from Mebo but the consequence falls within the Mishmi world. The transgression is his; the warning arrives through her cultural memory. This crossing of two relational frameworks within a single narrative sequence captures an essential part about how *The Black Hill* works; it is not the expression of one indigenous ontology but the creative staging of two, in contact with each other and with the colonial world pressing against both.

A similar relational logic governs the significance of the Mithun in Mishmi society. Aiyadurai's ethnographic research demonstrates that among Mishmi communities the Mithun occupies a position extending far beyond economic value. The animal plays a central role in marriage exchanges, ritual sacrifice, conflict resolution and relationships with spiritual beings. The sacrifice of a Mithun is regarded as the most significant form of exchange possible between humans and spirits, while the willful killing of a Mithun is treated as a serious offence equivalent to murder (Aiyadurai 3-4). Rather than for its usefulness the importance of a Mithun derives from its participation in a network of social, spiritual and ecological relations; a network in which human and non-human life are organized through reciprocity and obligation rather than hierarchy. Here, the resonance with Braidotti's *zoe*-centered critique of human exceptionalism is again clear: both frameworks insist on the value and agency of non-human life as constitutive of the world rather than supplementary to it.

Conclusion

Through the analysis of indigenous relational ontology in *The Black Hill*, this paper has argued that humans, land, animals and spirits and stories exist within interconnected networks of meaning and obligations that constitute a distinctive way of being in the world. Kajinsha's reading of the land, the *Biribik* narrative, and the cultural significance of the Mithun each challenge anthropocentric assumptions that position human life as separate from or superior from or superior to other forms of existence. Drawing these elements into dialogue with Rosi Braidotti's concept of *zoe* reveals important resonances. Both frameworks insist on the validity and agency of non-human life, both refuse the hierarchical separation of the human from the rest of the existence, and both challenge the specific models of the rational autonomous subject that has governed Western thought since the Enlightenment.

The paper has also insisted, throughout, on two forms of difference. The first is between the Adi and Mishmi communities themselves, whose different cosmologies the novel holds in productive tension through the relationship of Gimur and Kajinsha. The second is between these indigenous cosmologies and the posthumanist theory with which they have been placed in dialogue. The relational worldview presented in *The Black Hill* is not posthumanism disguised as indigenous. It is a living cosmology grounded in specific histories, oral traditions and ecological practices; a cosmology that pre-exist the philosophical problem to which posthumanism responds.

Works Cited

Aiyadurai, Ambika. "Tigers Are Our Brothers: Understanding Human-Nature Relations in the Mishmi Hills, Northeast India." Conservation & Society, vol. 14, no. 4, 2016, pp. 305-316.

Ananyaa, Prajnaa, and Amarjeet Nayak. "Storied Lands and Silenced Voices: Reading Mamang Dai's The Black Hill through the Lens of Terristory." Litinfinite Journal, vol. 7, no. 1, 2025, pp. 73-84.

Braidotti, Rosi. *The Posthuman*. Polity Press, 2013.

Cariou, Warren. "Terristory: Land and Language in the Indigenous Short Story — Oral and Written." Commonwealth Essays and Studies, vol. 42, no. 2, 2020, pp. 1-10.

Dai, Mamang. *The Black Hill*. Aleph Book Company, 2014.

Fanon, Frantz. Black Skin, White Masks. Translated by Charles L. Markmann, Grove Press, 1967.

Ferrando, Francesca. *Philosophical Posthumanism.* Bloomsbury Academic, 2019.

Mignolo, Walter D. Local Histories/Global Designs: Coloniality, Subaltern Knowledges, and Border Thinking. Princeton University Press, 2000.

Patel, Shivangi. "The Interconnection of Nature and Spirituality: Indigenous Wisdom in Mamang Dai's Work." International Journal for Multidisciplinary Research (IJFMR), vol. 7, no. 6, November-December 2025, pp. 1-11.

Preha C., VM Berlin Grace, Shiny Karunya T., Arnest Kharmawlong, Abisha AP, and D. David Wilson. "The Evolving Paradigms of Adi Tribal Identity: A Postcolonial Reading of The Black Hill by Mamang Dai." International Research Journal of Multidisciplinary Scope (IRJMS), vol. 6, no. 4, 2025, pp. 249-259.

Said, Edward. *Orientalism*. Vintage Books, 1979.