

Healing across borders: Reclaiming indigenous medicinal knowledge in Mamang Dai's *The Black Hill* through ecofeminist and postcolonial lenses



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ABSTRACT

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Knowledge about plants and herbs from Indigenous people has often been overlooked by systems supporting Western medical approaches. Because of epistemic suppression, often termed as epistemicide, traditional healing methods were displaced, disrupting the cultural, gender, and ecological foundations that sustained them. Mamang Dai's novel, *The Black Hill*, serves as a platform to challenge this erasure by disseminating Indigenous ideas through storytelling. Set in the 19th century Northeast India during British colonization, the novel contrasts emerging Western medical practices with Indigenous healing traditions rooted in spirituality, relationships, and reverence for nature. Applying postcolonial theory, the narrative illustrates how colonial medicine and missionaries attempted to supplant traditional practices with Western healthcare and religious beliefs. Simultaneously, an ecofeminist approach underscores women's critical roles as healers, custodians of spiritual traditions, and ecological knowledge, emphasizing their bond with the land, their communities, and cultural continuity. This research study argues that *The Black Hill* functions as a repository for Indigenous cultural knowledge, gendered healing methods, and sacred environmental wisdom. Through Dai's oral storytelling style, the narrative becomes a literary act of resistance against colonial stereotypes and a reaffirmation of Indigenous cultural integrity. Ultimately, the novel highlights the power of elevating Indigenous perspectives, thereby fostering a more equitable, interconnected, and sustainable world.

Contribution/ Originality: This study contributes to the existing literature by critically examining Mamang Dai's *The Black Hill* through integrated ecofeminist and postcolonial frameworks. It is one of the few studies that have investigated Indigenous medicinal epistemologies and women's healing roles, documenting literature as a site of epistemological recovery and cultural resistance.

1. INTRODUCTION

Indigenous medicine is a centuries-old system of knowledge, enriched by spiritual and cultural traditions developed through long-standing interactions with the natural environment. Indigenous people emphasize caring for the body, mind, and spirit as an integral part of maintaining good health (Lakshmi, Amirthalangam, & Parthasarathy, 2019). Unlike the Western biomedicine, Indigenous healing practices incorporate concepts of balance, harmony, and relationship, which are integral to land, community, and cosmology. As it becomes increasingly clear that biomedical models are limited, there is now a widespread demand to move beyond Eurocentric ways of knowing and acknowledge the value of Indigenous ways of understanding (Verma & Johri, 2024).

The movement to release knowledge from colonial thinking is about reviving stories that have been lost due to the colonial violence and systematic erasure. In Indigenous societies, literature plays a significant role in shifting attention to their cultures (Supriya, 2023). The literary authors tell memorable stories that unearth overlooked history, revive powerful voices, and preserve cultural wisdom. Dai (2014) establishes her as a distinguished authors from Arunachal Pradesh. The novel is based on the real events and traditions, portraying how Indigenous peoples interacted with the British colonial forces in the 19th century.

What makes *The Black Hill* important is that it helps readers understand traditional Indigenous approaches to healing as essential to both people and the natural world (Chatterjee, 2023). The novel views traditional medicine as more than just an old tradition; it is continually adapting and resisting attempts by colonialists and missionaries as Dai (2014) depicts, “The healer turned to the forest, chanting to the spirits, while the missionary preached of a God who knew no hills” (p. 98). Dai uses shamanic and healing characters to center traditional Indigenous knowledge that comes from the land and songs, as she also points out the ways Western science, Christianity, and government damaged Indigenous life. As a result, the novelist recovers the history of Indigenous communities and emphasizes their strength, independence, and their approach to knowledge. Dai (2014) holds, “Our stories are our strength, woven into the land, unbroken by the stranger’s laws” (p. 43).

This research paper analyzes the representation of Indigenous knowledge of nature and healing in *The Black Hill*, highlighting how it is sustained through the frameworks of ecofeminism and postcolonialism. The novel critiques influence of the Western medicine, affirms the value of traditional health beliefs, and positions women as custodians of nature and the sacred knowledge. The ecofeminist theory has been employed to examine the links between gender, the environment, and healing, while postcolonial theory helps reveal how colonialism tried to eliminate Indigenous knowledge (Daimari, 2024).

The selection of *The Black Hill* for research study is significant because its narrative weaves together history, folktales, and fiction to highlight overlooked knowledge systems and traditions. As a story from the marginalized Northeast of India, Dai’s novel contributes to wider conversations on decolonization, environmental care, and Indigenous rights. This research study addresses three central research questions:

1. How does *The Black Hill* depict the tensions between traditional Indigenous healing and Western medicine?
2. What roles do women play as healers and keepers of knowledge?
3. In what ways does the novel enable the survival and renewal of Indigenous worldviews?

2. THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

This research study draws on the postcolonial theory and ecofeminism to analyze representations of Indigenous medicine in Mamang Dai’s *The Black Hill*. By using postcolonial theory, scholars can recognize how colonists intentionally removed Indigenous knowledge. Ecofeminism provides a holistic perspective on the interconnectedness of women’s bodies, the environment, and cultural beliefs in the pursuit of healing (Brave Heart, 1998). Together, these frameworks highlight how power, resistance, and ecological consciousness intersect within Indigenous healing traditions (Kumar, 2018) allowing for a deeper understanding of the novel’s engagement with suppressed yet resilient knowledge.

2.1. Postcolonial Suppression of Indigenous Healing Systems

Postcolonial theory underscores the ongoing negative impact of colonialism on colonized societies, including the routine devaluation and silencing of ancestral ideas and knowledge (Duran & Duran, 2000). A profoundly damaging consequence of colonialism was that Western science became the sole accepted form of knowledge. Authorities subjected Indigenous people to epistemic violence, as taught by scholars like Edward Said and Ngũgĩ wa Thiong’o, by simply banishing their worldviews, languages, and cures (Rexlin & Latha, 2018). Colonization relied heavily on both the ideas and practices of biomedicine, which supported and influenced imperial policy.

In British India and especially in the Northeast, which practiced shamanism and used herbal medicines, British authorities usually viewed local healers with skepticism or extreme suspicion. “They called our chants superstition, but the forest knew the truth, and the spirits answered in the wind” (Dai, 2014). People usually considered traditional healing to be superstition, witchcraft, or quackery and chose to restrict or transform it with laws or religious movements. According to Kadu and Mahalle (2019) colonialism aimed to alter not only the treatment of Indigenous people's bodies but also their perceptions of healing by replacing their community-based healing methods with Western medical hospitals.

In *The Black Hill*, we see the problem of new knowledge meeting the existing knowledge of the locals, as exemplified by the importance of shamans and Christian missionaries. In many Indigenous cultures of Arunachal Pradesh, the shaman is important because their healing practices are spiritual, support nature, and strengthen the community (Singh & Singh, 2025). They gather their knowledge through learning from a mentor, having dreams, and participating in rituals, all of which are connected to themes around the world. The British admiral missionaries in the book try to oust Indigenous rule by introducing medical care and leading-edge thinking. “The missionary’s cross stood tall, but the shaman’s songs reached deeper, into the heart of the hills” (Dai, 2014). This vivid imagery explicitly contrasts colonial medicine’s superficial imposition (“missionary’s cross”) against Indigenous healing practices (“shaman’s songs”) that integrate deeply with nature and local spirituality. Dai uses this contrast metaphorically to critique Western medicine's lack of genuine connection with Indigenous life worlds. As Smith, Bell, and Findlay (2002) explains, this conflict reflects the “colonization of the mind,” where Indigenous people are pressured to see their own ways of knowing as inferior to colonial frameworks. *The Black Hill* resists such erasures and affirms the legitimacy of Indigenous healthcare traditions (Santhiswari & Palanisamy, 2021).

2.2. Ecofeminism: Land, Body, and Female Agency in Healing

The ecofeminism emerged as a theoretical framework to address the interconnected oppression of women and nature in the patriarchal and capitalist societies. Khaund (2021) argue that similar logics of control and objectification are applied to both women and the natural world. From an ecofeminist perspective, life is understood through the interdependence of all living beings rather than hierarchical, top-down structures, a principle that aligns closely with Indigenous ways of thinking. In her book Shiva (2016) highlights the deep connections between women, nature, and community well-being. Dai (2014) illustrates this in *The Black Hill*: “She walked the forest paths, her hands tracing the roots that healed, her heart bound to the earth’s rhythm” (p.158). Since ancient times, humans have learned about agriculture and healing through direct experience and living in harmony with the natural world. Within this worldview, healing extends beyond individual care to include the land, animals, spirits, and the broader community. Women as healers, midwives, and herbalists, play a central role in sustaining both community health and ecological balance (Gupta, 2022). While women’s roles may not always be depicted as central, they exert a profound influence within Indigenous communities. Women often inherit and transmit traditions, serve as storytellers, and practice healing, preserving knowledge about herbs, rituals, and taboos. As Dai (2014) writes about Gimur, “In her stories, the women kept the tribe alive, their voices carrying the secrets of herbs and stars” (p.174). Although narrative frequently focuses on the shaman and the British, women sustain cultural practices, care for the sick, and narrate tribal folktales. From an ecofeminist perspective, these women are represented as vital guardians of both community well-being and the natural environment (Basumatary, 2019).

The observation made by Dey (2020) regarding Western feminism’s tendency to generalize is apt in this context. In her essay, Dey urges that ‘Third World Women’ should not be treated as a single, homogeneous group and emphasizes the need to examine them within their specific local and historical contexts. Applying this framework, Indigenous women in *The Black Hill* are not seen solely as spiritual figures; instead, the focus is on how they confront settler colonization, the erosion of traditional practices, and the displacements from their ancestral lands.

Many elements of healing are derived directly from nature; the collection of herbs, the performance of rituals, and careful attention to seasonal cycles. This relational understanding of the environment stands in the stark contrast to the colonial perspective, which approaches nature primarily as a resource to be organized, exploited, and controlled for power and profit (Thakar & Budhhatti, 2024).

2.3. Intersection of Postcolonial and Ecofeminist Frameworks

Applying both postcolonial and ecofeminist theories offers readers a deeper understanding of *The Black Hill*. While postcolonial theory examines who holds power in the creation of knowledge, ecofeminism elucidates how this power is physically expressed, primarily about gender and the environment (Manuel & Rathna, 2023). According to Dai, healing and restoring balance involve resisting colonialism and consciously connecting with others.

Healing in the novel challenges colonial authority not only by contrasting with Western medicine but also by reflecting a worldview that rejects modernity's strict divisions between nature and culture, male and female, reason and emotion, and science and spirituality (Sarangi, 2017). As Das (2024) highlights, this perspective reorients knowledge to emphasize justice, sustainability, and the protection of cultural identity. Dai resonates with Silvia Federici's concept of the close link between the control of women's bodies and the suppression of unconventional beliefs and practices. In her book, Federici (2004) analyzes how European witch hunts specifically targeted women, aimed to eradicate their traditional knowledge of healing. Similarly, in the novel, shamans in Indigenous communities, face treatment comparable to that of herbalists under colonial scrutiny, as their practices were discouraged and marginalized. Harms inflicted on healers served to control people's bodies and minds, forming part of the broader colonial efforts to assert power and dominance (Chakraborty, 2019).

3. INDIGENOUS EPISTEMOLOGY VS. WESTERN MEDICINE

The novel highlights the key conflict between Indigenous knowledge and the biomedical approach followed in the West. The novel presents a captivating setting to explore the differences in world outlooks behind two secret healing systems—one based on faith, society, and the unity of nature—and the other on knowledge, power, and authority (Rai & Shukla, 2021). Dai (2014) shows that this form of epistemic confrontation is a form of colonialism that denigrates and unbalances Indigenous everyday realities. The author clearly outlines how Indigenous knowledge originates from experience, intuition, and nature, thereby highlighting its distinct difference from the rigid and highlights the key conflict between Indigenous knowledge and Western biomedicine.

3.1. Western Biomedicine and Colonial Logic

Under colonial rule, Western medicine was often used as a tool of control rather than care, enforcing Western standards of health and hygiene on colonized populations (Singh Chopra, 2024). In *The Black Hill*, this is evident as missionaries and government officials attempt to suppress Indigenous ways of learning and healing. Through clinics, missionary activities, and legislation, Western medicine becomes an instrument of the colonial authority, consolidating power over Indigenous communities (Chatterjee, 2023).

The novel reveals that the colonial medical gaze is evident in characters who judge Indigenous traditions as wrong, illogical, or dangerous (Poets & Gogoi, 2023). Instead of understanding practices from the Indigenous perspective, these outsiders attempt to reshape Indigenous life according to the Western scientific methods. The mission hospitals are depicted not only as the centers of treatment but also as spaces where medical practice and religious instruction are inseparable. In this sense, medicine functions both as an instrument and a symbol of colonial authority (Sengupta, 2023). Dai (2014) writes, "They called our chants superstition, but the forest knew the truth, and the spirits answered in the wind" (p.135). This statement vividly contrasts the colonial dismissal of Indigenous healing as "superstition" with the Indigenous affirmation of nature, spirit, and traditional knowledge. Numerous researchers have observed that colonial powers dismissed Indigenous knowledge as backward or

primitive. Instead of directly replacing Indigenous healing practices, the imposition of biomedicine often served to obscure, legitimize coercion against, or mock these traditions (Ghosh, 2020). The social rejection of Indigenous practices, as well as the way events are narrated in *The Black Hill*, reveal the profound disparities in knowledge and authority that existed between Western and Indigenous peoples during the colonial period.

3.2. Indigenous Epistemology as Embodied and Ecological

In *The Black Hill*, Indigenous epistemology is deeply concerned for the environment, spiritual beliefs, and communal well-being (Brar & Khanna, 2024). Healing and recovery in the narrative are depicted through the observance of rituals, the interpretation of myths, the honoring of seasonal cycles, and engagement with sacred landscapes. Dai (2014) emphasizes this worldview when she writes, “The shaman read the signs in the river’s flow, healing not just the body but the bond between land and soul” (p.182). Through the shaman, it is demonstrated how traditional culture understands existence as an interconnected system, with knowledge acquired not only through mentorship but also through dreams and spiritual communion with nature. Such knowledge is embodied in practice, expressed through rituals, physical gestures, chanted prayers, and the careful preparation and use of medicinal herbs.

By depicting how healers watch the behavior of animals, interpret signs in nature, and follow community taboos, Dai enriches the concept of traditional medicine, making it more vivid and engaging. These practices are not only effective within the contexts in which they developed but also arise organically from attentive observation and care for the land and its inhabitants, rather than from abstract theoretical frameworks. Additionally, Indigenous healing is deeply rooted in the community life, encompassing the performance of ceremonies, observation of the shared cultural beliefs, and mutual reliance among all beings including human or non-human (Halder, Bolpur, & Bengal, 2023). Illness is understood as an indication of imbalance, spiritual, social, or environmental. Consequently, healing relies on the participation of the entire community and engages the land that sustains them. This approach aligns with Bosco (2025) perspective, which emphasizes that Indigenous people recognize and validate knowledge through relational bonds rather than through hierarchical ranking.

3.3. Spirituality and Healing in Dai’s Narrative

The novel is set in a world where the spiritual and material realms are deeply intertwined rather than separate. During rituals, shamans sometimes invoke the spirits of ancestors or communicate with mountain deities (Chowdhury, 2021). They are portrayed with respect and seriousness, suggesting that true health involves harmony between humans and the surrounding world. One example in the novel is ceremonial healing performed by the shaman for both physical and spiritual purposes, aiming to restore balance among individuals, their ancestors, and the land (Satapathy & Nayak, 2020). These practices illustrate the central principle of Indigenous epistemology in which all aspects of life are interconnected. Healing functions to restore balance in the world while honoring and sacralizing all forms of life. This aspect of faith stands in contrast to the rational-secular Western medicine, which tends to separate the body and health from spiritual and social contexts. In Western practice, illness is generally interpreted through diagnosis and treatment, frequently neglecting the patient’s emotional state or surrounding environment (Ghosh, 2021). In contrast the novel illustrates that healing unfolds differently depending on the specific context and way it is practiced.

3.4. Resistance Through Epistemology

Dai’s novel integrates descriptions of Indigenous healing with the argument that these practices function as a form of resistance to the colonial rule. Continuing with shamanistic ceremonies despite exposure to Western medicine demonstrates a commitment to preserving traditional ways of knowing (Halder, 2020). As Dai (2014)

writes, “Even as the white man’s medicine spread, the people returned to the shaman, trusting the old ways to mend what was broken” (p.34).

The theme of resistance becomes evident as the characters confront British colonialism. Although missionaries established hospitals and schools, many Indigenous people continued to rely on the guidance of their traditional experts and community elders (Gehlot, 2024). Their determination is portrayed as intentional, emphasizing their individuality. This reflects what (Malik, 2020) describes as the survival of Indigenous knowledge, demonstrating that it remains capable of adaptation and transformation. Consequently, Dai (2014) reclaims narrative space by illustrating that Indigenous ways of knowing are both meaningful and essential for the well-being of the entire community. Her work contributes to a growing field of scholarship that seeks to expand the imagination by presenting alternative approaches to knowledge, healing, and ways of life.

3.5. *The Role of Nature and Environment*

Dai (2014) highlights an important difference between Indigenous and Western approaches to healing, especially in the way the environment is understood. In *The Black Hill*, the surroundings actively influence the healing process. Forests, rivers, and mountains possess agency and can remember radiating spiritual energy. The natural world offers medicine, meaning, and identity and preserves many of humanity’s oldest insights (Salim, 2023). To employ chemistry, scientists often separate compounds, control various factors, and seek applications that can benefit all (Pachau & Daimari, 2024). This method frequently overlooks the relational and place-specific knowledge that Indigenous healers acquire and preserve over their lifetimes. In her narrative, Dai emphasizes that ethics and sustainability are essential components of this type of farming rather than relying on exploitation, which is commonly observed in large-scale agricultural practices. The shaman’s healing books illustrate how humans and nature can coexist in harmony and maintain equilibrium. Western pharmaceutical science often isolates medicine from its cultural and ecological context, whereas this new practice values both the cultural and the environmental dimensions.

3.6. *Narrative Strategy as Epistemological Recovery*

Dai’s approach to writing assumes the role of epistemological recovery. She incorporates Indigenous approaches and beliefs at every level of her novel, ensuring that Indigenous thinking is not hidden from view (Singha, 2020). She does not sugarcoat health rituals by making them fancy; instead, she demonstrates their importance to this community. The way history, myth, and everyday life intersect in the story aligns with the way Indigenous people view and understand the world (Kalita, 2025). The novel acts as a platform for conversation among the different worldviews, where they are openly and critically debated. Instead of resolving this conflict, Dai keeps it lively and remains silent on her stance regarding healing. This strategy is inspired by Monica and Nayak (2024) who advocate rejecting the dominance of Eurocentric beliefs in shaping indigenous medicinal knowledge. In *The Black Hill*, Mamang Dai portrays interplay between the Western and Indigenous ways of healing. By demonstrating how spiritual, physical, and ecological learning intersect, she challenges the colonial mistreatment of Indigenous ways (Das, 2024). The author gives more weight to intuitive healing than accepted ideas in modern medical science. By exploring the differences between these theories, Dai encourages readers to reassess who is qualified to determine the boundaries of knowledge and how it is defined. By taking this step, she reintroduces stories and knowledge about these traditions, proving that Indigenous healing is still practiced today and addresses the needs of First Peoples and the environment (Prodhani & Kuhad, 2022).

4. COLONIAL IMPACT ON TRADITIONAL HEALING SYSTEMS

Dai depicts foreigners arriving with their guns and their promises. They had taken land, rivers and forests and called it progress. This narration from the novel highlights the sweeping loss inflicted by colonial intrusion. Dai

presents the colonial influence on the lands, traditions, and knowledge of Indigenous people with depth and sincerity in *The Black Hill*. The novel emphasizes the significant damage that colonial invasion inflicted on Indigenous healing practices and customs. Through the narrative, readers learn that colonial and missionary activities displaced political authority and economic independence, while deliberately marginalizing traditional beliefs concerning health, healing, and religion within Indigenous communities (Ameera & Peerani, 2025). The experiences of epistemic violence and cultural resistance encountered by Indigenous communities are traced through the characters, events, and important symbols portrayed in *The Black Hill*.

4.1. British and Missionary Incursions into Sacred Spaces

Often, colonial power in Arunachal Pradesh, a tribal area, was evident in both laws and the act of trespassing on sacred areas. Anjum (2024) shows that the missionaries and the Britishers brought not only new land claims but also new ideas and assumptions. The places where Indigenous people find healing, such as forests, mountains, and rivers, are being monitored, mapped, and managed through regulations. Dai (2014) illustrates how the colonial forces sought to dominate Indigenous sacred landscapes, stating: "The hills, once sacred, were mapped and claimed, but their spirits whispered still to those who listened" (p. 196). She underscores the persistence of the land's spiritual essence in the face of colonial appropriation. The 'whispering spirits' serves as a metaphor for the resilience of indigenous spirituality and identity, persistently challenging colonial attempts at erasure. By treating these places as locations to extract resources or establish missions, colonial leaders began to undermine the religious foundations that support traditional medicine. This connects with the early declaration of village elders: "The British may conquer the world, but they will never take our land" (Dai, 2014) affirming Indigenous attachment to land and spiritual sovereignty. Mamang Dai's representation of landscape is key to envisioning and applying healing in Indigenous tradition. The British placed Western medicine at the heart of their civilizing mission, making them seem as if they brought both answers and progress to the colonies. As a result, some people now regard traditional healers, particularly shamans, as relics of the past (Chatterjee, 2021).

4.2. Medical Missions and Cultural Erasure

In the novel, missionaries, doctors, and nurses illustrate the connection between Sunday services and medical treatment. Shamanic practices, natural remedies, and communal healing ceremonies are depicted as uneducated, marginalized, and inferior. This suggests that people are encouraged to rely on the modern medical approaches over traditional methods. Dai (2014) observes, "In their hospitals, they offered salvation with medicine, but the people longed for the songs that healed the spirit" (p. 241). The strategy that colonial governments used for pacification depended largely on merging medicine with religion. Often, healthcare relied on embracing religious teachings, and missionaries served as both counselors and health experts. In *The Black Hill*, local issues are illustrated through the interactions between Western medical settlers and established missionaries who work alongside the Indigenous community (Lakshmi & Natarajan, 2019). This opinion makes it clear that one can be healed or saved only by rejecting one's Indigenous heritage. From this perspective, the *The Black Hill* describes how Western medicine served as a form of covert influence, enabling colonial authority to penetrate deeper into the culture.

4.3. Characterization of Resistance and Cultural Persistence

The Black Hill is not only about loss but also the intense pressure to conform. The novel highlights the various forms of resistance to colonialism, subtle yet deliberate, showing how people preserved their customs under external influence (Verma & Johri, 2024). In the novel, resistance often appears as perseverance rather than violence. By doing so, Indigenous people demonstrate that their values and beliefs remain significant. Dai (2014) recounts, "We fought back, resisted their tyranny. But they had superior weapons, superior technology. They crushed our rebellion, silenced our voices," reflecting how Indigenous resistance was violently suppressed.

The novel features the shaman as a main character who is the opposite, both literally and figuratively, of the missionary doctor (Chatterjee, 2023). The shaman challenges the prevailing understanding of the order by proposing an alternative perspective on the body, illness, and community. The fact that the shaman holds on to their culture despite threats tells the reader about their strong character. Dai endows this character with a sense of meaning beyond myths and ethics, which humanizes shaman and justifies their helpful role. Others, meanwhile, rebel quietly by avoiding the missionary, questioning Western medicine, and still turning to older people and spirits for guidance. In Dai's account, the focus moves away from portraying a disappearing identity and instead documents a community that continually evolves through its material culture, Daily practices, and collective memories.

4.4. Colonial Displacement of Communal Health Ethics

The most significant aspect the novel discusses is how people's methods of healing shifted from being community-based to relying on individual doctors. Typically, healing in traditional contexts involves community work, where the healer is connected to ancestors, spirits, and nature as much as the treatment of the individual (Kumar, 2018). In Western biomedicine, the primary concerns are isolated conditions and individualized care, therefore traditional group care is often abandoned. It is a way for the text to acknowledge that our beliefs have shifted, moving away from ethical relationships to ideas and feelings of separation (Rexlin & Latha, 2018). *The Black Hill* examines how the actions of colonizers damaged Indigenous healing traditions, aside from forcing people to move and affecting their ways of thinking. By illustrating the changes that resulted from the introduction of spaces, missions, and clashes, the novel charts the far-reaching consequences of colonialism on healthcare, healing efforts, and knowledge (Kadu & Mahalle, 2019). Owing to its perceptive and rigorous treatment of the subject, Mamang Dai's narrative holds significant historical value. It contributes to decolonization by reminding readers of the importance of appreciating Indigenous ways of knowing in today's world.

5. ROLE OF WOMEN AS HEALERS

Despite not occupying prominent roles, women in *The Black Hill* are primary custodians of religious practices, act as mediators between spirits and humans, and play a crucial role in maintaining ecological and communal balance (Singh & Singh, 2025). Most of the story's action follows the shaman and other men, but the strong roles of women and the glimpses of how they resist oppression shed new light on the complexities behind healing (Santhiswari & Palanisamy, 2021). It examines the gendered and spiritual aspects of healing in Dai's books. It explores the role of female characters in how Indigenous women are perceived in real life as ecological and cultural protectors.

5.1. Women as Knowledge Keepers and Healers in Dai's Narrative

In *The Black Hill*, women rarely occupy central roles in political or colonial conflicts (Khaund, 2021). Their significance lies in connecting people through stories, ceremonies, and communal practices. By caring for the sick, preparing medicines, participating in rituals, and upholding agricultural and seasonal taboos, women actively sustain their community. As Dai (2014) portrays about Gimur when she writes, "She stirred the herbs with care, each leaf a story, each root a promise to keep the people whole" (p. 206). Although largely invisible to the colonial world, these domestic practices are essential for preserving Indigenous healing traditions and are firmly grounded in Indigenous knowledge.

Healing practices are transmitted to women by other women or within the community, grounded in the local environment, and preserved by experienced practitioners over generations (Gupta, 2022). For example, those who prepare for rituals or make herbal infusions possess a detailed understanding of both natural cycles and the beneficial properties of herbs. While males are held in the higher ritual status, women mostly take charge of

ensuring their culture survives, an aspect that mainstream medicine misunderstands but which is crucial for community health (Basumatary, 2019). Dai (2014) emphasizes the profound connection between female healers and the natural world. She writes, Gimur “She walked along the forest paths, her hands tracing the roots that healed and her heart attuned to the rhythm of the earth” (p.158). The novelist portrays how these healers are deeply intertwined with the environment, drawing both knowledge and strength from it. This depiction underscores the central role of nature in sustaining traditional healing practices and the spiritual and emotional bond between women and the land. In the society depicted in the novel, women commonly serve as caretakers and are responsible for guiding their families’ spiritual lives, both within the home and in natural settings (Dey, 2020). They provide an alternative form of healing that progresses gradually, emphasizes repetition, and prioritizes relational engagement over decisions made solely by a single practitioner.

5.2. *The Gendered Nature of Healing: Spiritual and Ecological Dimensions*

In the narrative, healing is presented as a gendered practice, though not one restricted to biological difference. The text repeatedly associates women with spiritual forces linked to fertility, the land, and continuity (Biswas, 2019). Through the adoption of oral storytelling patterns and close alignment with natural rhythms, the narrative constructs a worldview that positions women as central nurturers of the earth. Healing is portrayed as a vital dimension of the spiritual path. Women’s engagement in rituals, songs, and the preparation of sacred materials positions them as intermediaries between the physical and spiritual realms. As Dai (2014) notes, “Her songs joined the ancestors to the living, weaving a thread of healing through the village...” This depiction emphasizes the central role of women in sustaining communal and spiritual well-being. Karthika and Pavithra (2020) argue that, among ecofeminists, women’s ways of knowing are closely linked to their bodies, the environment, and feelings, all of which are often considered of lesser value by the mainstream patriarchal and capitalist structures. In *The Black Hill*, these traits are recognized and respected as essential for life. Consequently, female characters can resist attempts by colonists and the biomedical field to commodify and rationalize both life and the land (Thakar & Budhbhatti, 2024).

5.3. *Indigenous Women in Real-World Contexts: Custodians of Knowledge and Land*

The views of women in *The Black Hill* closely reflect insights from ethnographic studies on Indigenous women in the Global South. For a long time, women in Indigenous societies have generally been the primary caregivers for people’s health, dealing with herbs, assisting during childbirth, and participating in religious ceremonies (Manuel & Rathna, 2023). They often depend on an understanding of native plants, the pace of nature, and the principles of the good Christian faith. It involves knowledge of both skills and ethics regarding the responsible use of resources, repaying nature, and caring for what will come next for humans. According to Sarangi (2017) in *Decolonizing Methodologies*, Indigenous women’s knowledge is often ignored because it is embedded in Daily practices rather than in established organizations. Much of Indigenous science is embedded in rituals, such as those guiding childbirth, planting crops, celebrating the seasons, and practicing medicine, which do not separate things like science, culture, nature, body, or spirit. Additionally, many Indigenous women have worked to protect essential land from extraction and harm. As healers, they strive to safeguard both the health and the community’s spiritual values and natural environment (Das, 2024). Women in Arunachal Pradesh, in the Northeastern part of India, including those represented in Dai’s narrative assume the responsibility of safeguarding knowledge about the land along with its medicinal and ritual significance. As Dai (2014) notes, “In her stories, the women kept the tribe alive, their voices carrying the secrets of herbs and stars” (p.179). The novel thereby acknowledges women as vital custodians of oral traditions and repositories of healing wisdom. By situating her female characters within this social and cultural context, Mamang Dai highlights the significance of women’s understanding of Indigenous communities (Sarkar &

Singh, 2024). She artfully shows how colonial policies and gender discrimination oppressed Indigenous people without feeling the need to make native women into romantic or exciting characters.

5.4. Subversion of Colonial Gender Norms

Traditionally, colonialism brought about Victorian rules of behavior that undermined the leadership, religious, and ecological roles of women. Regardless, the novel challenges gender roles as described by the early settlers (Rai & Shukla, 2021). Instead of relying on colonial ideas of femininity, the female characters in the novel operate within a belief system that regards their work as crucial to the well-being of the community. In spite of conforming to colonial constructions of femininity, the female characters in the novel operate within a cultural framework that positions their roles as essential to the well-being of the community. Dai (2014) writes, "Gimur did everything that young girls in the village were expected to do... but she was uncontrollable and daring, more like a boy, whistling and climbing trees and getting into scrapes" (p.11). Through this description, Dai asserts Gimur's defiance of gender expectations, presenting her as a figure whose boldness challenges prescribed social roles for women in the community. This characterization of Gimur highlights her defiance of restrictive gender norms and presents her as a figure who negotiates social expectations while asserting her individuality. At times, their actions appear calm, yet these behaviors stand in contrast to the objectives of colonial authorities who sought suppression. They exemplify what Chandra Talpade Mohanty describes as 'feminist agency in tradition,' which, though not always overtly radical, remains deeply significant within their societies (Singh Chopra, 2024). Mamang Dai employs a gentle yet compelling narrative in *The Black Hill* to illuminate women's roles as caregivers, custodians of tradition, and spiritual mediators within their communities. Women are represented as possessing ecological knowledge, spiritual awareness, and nurturing capacities that sustain collective life. Such representation destabilizes dominant social structures that marginalize women and instead affirms the authority embedded in their practices and knowledge systems (Ghosh, 2020). In real life, the roles of Indigenous women contribute to the stability and strength of their cultures and environments. Focusing on aspects of gender and spirituality in treatment, Dai advances a decolonial feminist perspective that highlights the central role of women in maintaining and promoting Indigenous knowledge. As opposed to being positioned on the periphery, women from this story became quiet heroes, keeping alive a knowledge system that colonial forces tried to destroy.

6. FICTION AS ARCHIVAL PRACTICE

In Indigenous and postcolonial contexts, fiction serves to preserve their culture, resist domination, and reclaim their heritage. Mamang Dai's narrative exemplifies the ways in which fiction transmits memories, ideas, and knowledge disrupted or suppressed during colonial encounters (Singh & Shekhawat, 2024). Through the integration of oral traditions and historical memory, the narrative enacts epistemic recovery, ensuring the survival of Indigenous knowledge systems in the face of colonial erasure. *The Black Hill* serves as a tool to recover Indigenous identity, land ownership, and healing knowledge through its narrative structure, major themes, and writing style (Bosco, 2025).

6.1. Oral Storytelling and Narrative Style

A native of Arunachal Pradesh, Mamang Dai incorporates elements of oral tradition into Indian English poetry, journalism, and literature. She communicates the story much as if it was shared by storytellers, where there is a little distinction between the past, present, and future, and where people are connected to the land (Ghosh, 2021). Unlike novels with a single, linear storyline, *The Black hill* novel employs a braided method, interweaving myth, history, spirituality, and stories about individuals. The statement "Tell them we were good. Tell them we also had some things to say. But we cannot read and write. So, we tell them" (Dai, 2014) carries deep significance in *The Black Hill*. This utterance conveys the community's effort to preserve dignity and assert moral worth in the face

of colonial erasure. The reference to the inability to “read and write” emphasizes reliance on oral traditions, through which knowledge of the land, medicinal practices, and spiritual customs has been sustained across generations. This directly challenges the colonial privilege of literacy as the only valid form of knowledge, showing how Indigenous epistemologies, particularly healing wisdom, and ecological understanding, were marginalized within dominant frameworks. Storytelling thus functions as both an archive of Indigenous knowledge and an act of resistance, ensuring that cultural memory, medicinal traditions, and ecological practices continue despite suppression. Like Indigenous oral traditions, the story employs recurring narratives, anecdotes, and metaphors to convey knowledge rather than writing it down. Dai (2014) asserts, “Every dawn I think all the stories of the world are connected. At night another voice tells me no, there are more stories yet that are silent and separate. There are many lost stories in the world and versions that were misplaced yesterday or a thousand years ago” (p.8). Through this reflection, Dai emphasizes the fragility and multiplicity of oral traditions, suggesting that stories are constantly at risk of being forgotten, yet they remain vital links to the cultural memory. By foregrounding this narrative strategy, Dai challenges the long-established tendency to regard written records as more authoritative than oral histories, a bias that has contributed to the marginalization of Indigenous voices. Archives, geographical maps, and legal frameworks were instruments through which colonial society was structured, organized, and controlled. In contrast, the narrative in *The Black Hill* is fluid, permeable, and imbued with emotion. By positioning oral traditions as equally legitimate forms of knowledge, the text challenges dominant epistemologies and reaffirms the validity of Indigenous ways of transmitting memory and cultural wisdom (Gehlot, 2024). The use of local idioms, religious motifs, and speech patterns rooted in tribal life reinforces the novel’s bond with orality. By weaving ancient mythology together with lived experiences from human history, *The Black Hill* revives the past in a vivid and meaningful way. The narrative thereby functions as a cultural archive, preserving accounts of people and events that remain absent from conventional historical texts.

6.2. Fiction Against Epistemicide

The need for collection and preservation is evident, if colonization, religion, and science have purposely erased much Indigenous knowledge. As Salim (2023) claims, epistemicide refers to the loss of knowledge as well as the situations that support its spread. This causes languages, rituals, oral stories, healing practices, and beliefs to be lost, preserving physical and mental knowledge. To prevent her heritage from being wiped out, Dai writes about shamanism, animism, Indigenous medicine, and Indigenous understanding of the world in her novel, *The Black Hill*. The shaman is recognized not only as a historical figure but also as a key figure in the transmission of knowledge. Dai demonstrates interesting religious and psychological depths within Indigenous traditions. The rituals, chants, and healing techniques appear in the tale, accurately captured, and honored, so they are recognized as their way of knowing. Thus, such narrative choices challenge ways of thinking that relegate such knowledge to the realm of non-worldly reason (Monica & Nayak, 2024). In addition, Dai highlights real events from India’s history, such as British rule in Northeast India and the resulting cultural transitions, to underscore the political significance of epistemic survival. It saves information that is missing from official records or has been wrongly described. Fiction here serves to expand our understanding of history by being creative, inclusive, and supportive.

6.3. Reclamation of Identity and Memory

The Black Hill succeeds in uniquely returning Indigenous identity to its former position of strength. While it acknowledges the disruptions caused by colonialism and modernity it also presents a clear and worthy picture of Indigenous people and their adaptable and durable way of life: “The land held our memories, and in its embrace, we found who we were, despite the stranger’s maps” (Dai, 2014). When writers reclaim, it does not ignore wounds or shocks; instead, they celebrate the existence of survivor communities and their ongoing resilience. The losses depicted in the novel are not limited to material dispossession but also encompass the erosion of Indigenous

knowledge systems, including healing traditions, rituals, and oral memory. These are presented not merely as consequences of colonization but as profound journeys of survival that the characters must navigate. Their identities are shaped and sustained through the preservation of land, ritual, and memory, which function as enduring sources of strength beyond direct opposition to colonial forces (Prodhani & Kuhad, 2022). Therefore, Dai presents readers with a distinct narrative about Indigenous life in Northeast India, one that diverges from dominant colonial accounts of assimilation and loss. The text emphasizes that identity is not a fixed category but an interactive concept, formed through connections with the land and sustained through collective memory and narrative traditions. Through the act of narrativizing lived experiences, Dai underscores the role of memory as a source of both political agency and spiritual strength. *The Black Hill* illustrates that remembering is not a passive act but an active process that challenges contemporary realities while safeguarding the knowledge, values, and spiritual traditions of Indigenous communities. *The Black Hill* aligns with what Ngũgĩ wa Thiong'o describes as the "decolonization of the mind," opposing colonial narratives and asserting the authentic identities of Indigenous people (Chatterjee, 2021). The novel's closing words— "[They] did not know what the history books would say about them... maybe 'so-and-so died in the village war' and she herself disappeared from history" (Dai, 2014)—make explicit the gap between lived experience and official records.

6.4. Land and Healing as Archival Anchors

A critical aspect of this novel is that land grounds reader's understanding of indigenous medicinal knowledge. Many people view the mountains, rivers, forests, and valleys as places with profound religious and healing significance (Khaund, 2021). Dai's vivid descriptions give importance to these places in the lives of Indigenous peoples. The land gives medicines, holds sacred sites, and helps transmit both memories and sense of identity. There is a way that land helps remember that it is itself like archiving. Any ritual taking place in a sacred place, each herb respected during the gathering, and every story shared about ancestors and their natural locations—all these things help maintain knowledge across generations (Dey, 2020). The novel articulates this change by viewing land not just as a resource but as a specific kind of memory. It collected stories, spiritual beliefs, and ecological insights. The author highlights the connection between land, healing, and stories to emphasize that colonial views of land as unchanging and exploitable are incorrect. It draws on a philosophy where land is alive and sacred—a place for gaining, sharing, and finding knowledge (Thakar & Budhbhatti, 2024). As a result, Indigenous healing tradition highlights how modern ways of thinking often separate people from their place and meaning. Dai articulates narrative in *The Black Hill* to defend and protect the culture and memories of Indigenous people. Her storytelling, shaped by oral traditions and memory, creates a literary repository that preserves Indigenous ways of thinking at a time when they face the threat of erasure under colonialism. In *The Black Hill*, through the creation of vivid characters, magical settings, and intertwined stories of the past, Dai foregrounds identity, memory, and healing as essential to Indigenous survival. Considering the historical destruction of documents, the novel underscores how the act of storytelling enables communities to resist the loss of their worldview, which is grounded in relationships, spirituality, and ecology (Rai & Shukla, 2021). *The Black Hill* ultimately demonstrates how fiction can function as a tool of decolonization, allowing communities to recall suppressed histories, recover forgotten voices, and revitalize ancestral knowledge.

7. CONCLUSION

This research study examines how *The Black Hill* reframes Indigenous healing as an embodied, ecological, and communal epistemology that continues to survive despite the disruptions caused by colonialism. By foregrounding shamanic practices and women's everyday forms of care, the novel presents a knowledge system that resists reduction to the rationalized and instrumental logic of colonial biomedicine. In doing so, Dai positions land, story, and ritual as interconnected repositories of knowledge and cultural continuity. In the novel one of the key

arguments deal with Indigenous healing practices that cannot be understood in isolation from the ecological world order in which they are embedded. Herbal remedies, agricultural cycles, and seasonal rituals all reflect a worldview where health is inseparable from the health of rivers, forests, and soil. This stands in sharp contrast to the colonial biomedical approach, which often abstracts illness from its environment and reduces healing to technical intervention. The novel suggests that such abstraction is not only culturally alien but also insufficient to sustain communal well-being in the long term. Furthermore, the novel highlights the role of women as central custodians of this ecological knowledge. By caring for the sick, preparing medicines, observing agricultural taboos, and narrating stories that carry ancestral wisdom, women sustain both the physical and spiritual health of their communities. Dai's portrayal challenges the marginalization of women in the dominant historical narratives by showing how their knowledge and labor are indispensable for communal survival. When read through an ecofeminist lens, these depictions illustrate how gendered knowledge and ecological sustainability are mutually reinforcing, positioning women as vital agents in the preservation of Indigenous epistemologies. The postcolonial perspective also reveals how *The Black Hill* critiques the violence of colonial intrusion. The imposition of foreign medical systems, land appropriation, and the dismissal of Indigenous spirituality sought to dismantle communal forms of knowledge. Yet Dai demonstrates that Indigenous healing is resilient, finding continuity in ritual, oral traditions, and the embodied practices of ordinary people. This resilience underscores the idea that knowledge is not merely stored in written archives but lives in daily practice, memory, and ecological interaction.

The broader implication of this study is that literature such as Dai's functions as a cultural archive. By narrating Indigenous healing practices, *The Black Hill* preserves ways of knowing that might otherwise be erased or forgotten. For contemporary readers, especially in the context of environmental crises and global health debates, the novel offers valuable insights into alternative epistemologies that prioritize balance, reciprocity, and interconnectedness. It challenges the dominance of Western biomedical models by reminding readers of health of indigenous people that cannot be detached from community or environment.

In conclusion, Dai's work invites readers, literary scholars, critics to rethink about the relationship among land, body, knowledge, and harmony with nature. Healing, as represented in *The Black Hill*, is not a matter of detached technique but a living practice sustained by reciprocal relations among humans, non-human beings, and the spiritual realm. This conclusion reinforces the importance of approaching Indigenous texts with theoretical frameworks that can honor their complexity, particularly postcolonial studies for its attention to power and dispossession, and ecofeminism for its recognition of the intertwined oppressions of women and nature. By bringing these perspectives together, the analysis affirms that Indigenous healing endures as both a cultural memory and a viable alternative to dominant epistemologies, carrying relevance far beyond its immediate historical and geographical context.

7.1. Limitations

The analysis is text-based and limited to a single novel; future studies can facilitate to triangulate with oral histories and ethnography from different communities of Arunachal Pradesh

7.2. Implications

Literary texts can operate as cultural archives, preserving endangered knowledge that inform contemporary debates on health and sustainability.

7.3. Recommendation

The comparison between Dai's archival-making methods and the contemporary Northeast Indian writer may facilitate the further study to examine how female knowledge keepers are represented across genres.

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