

# An Analytical Study Of Social, Ethical And Environmental Themes In The Black Hill By Mamang Dai

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## Abstract

The complex intertwining of social, ethical and environmental themes in Mamang Dai 2014 novel *The Black Hill* a notable piece of contemporary Indian literature from Northeast India is examined in this study. This study examines how Dai creates a narrative that situates environmental consciousness as inextricably linked to social justice and ethical duty through a thorough textual analysis using ecocritical, postcolonial and ethical critique frameworks. Novel challenges anthropocentric worldviews by depicting terrain of Arunachal Pradesh as an active player in human affairs rather than just a backdrop. This essay examines the intersections of colonial legacies, modernizing pressures, cultural displacement and indigenous knowledge systems, tribal cosmology and environmental degradation. According to findings, Dai narrative creates a triadic relationship between social justice, environmental preservation and ethical behavior, whereby deterioration of one aspect invariably jeopardizes others. In addition to illustrating how regional literary voices express universal concerns about sustainability, justice and human-nature relationships, this study adds to the expanding corpus of research on indigenous environmental literature. This study shows how *The Black Hill* functions as a cultural archive and a warning about repercussions of breaking traditional ecological ties by looking at particular textual examples, character motives and narrative structures.

**Keywords:** Mamang Dai, The Black Hill, Ecocriticism, Environmental Ethics

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## 1. Introduction

Modern Indian writing from Northeast has specifically come into limelight due to its singular positioning, which strives for confluence of ecological awareness, indigenous knowledge systems and postcolonial realities. One of the celebrated authors from Arunachal Pradesh, who has won the prestigious Sahitya Akademi Award, is Mamang Dai. The 2014 novel by her, *The Black Hill*, marks an exemplary exploration of concerns related to ecology, social change and responsibility in era of accelerated modernization in one of India most ecologically diverse and culturally unusual regions.

Situated against the imposing backdrop of Arunachal Pradesh rugged terrain, *The Black Hill* is the story of a hill that is not only geographically but spiritually significant to the Adi tribe that inhabits the land. The novel attempts to bring together various temporal planes of history, including the pre-colonial peaceful coexistence, colonial disruption, post-independence

developmentalist agendas and current ecological crises, in a comprehensive critique of effects of modernity on indigenous societies and the environment (Dai, 2014). Layered narrative mode engages with extent to which the disconnection between human and natural history results not only in ecological degradation but also in social disintegration.

The value of exploring *The Black Hill* in light of environmental, social and ethical themes can be linked to the fact that it has potential to highlight how indigenous literary voices approach concepts of sustainability and justice in a completely different way from overall environmental discourse. For instance, while the Western approach to ecocriticism seems focused on wilderness preservation and various issues of climate change, indigenous environmental literature tends to approach environmental issues with consideration of social issues, cultural issues and spiritual issues overall, as highlighted

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by Huggan and Tiffin in 2015. Similarly, Dai novel is unable to compartmentalize these issues.

Recent literature in ecocriticism has focused on the need to engage with various epistemological perspectives, especially those which have been influenced by postcolonial world, in which the degradation of the environment cannot be separated from the history of oppression and subsequent marginalization of these communities (Nixon, 2011; Chakrabarty, 2021). Black Hill makes a useful contribution to dialogue around this subject, not only by highlighting complex understanding of relationships between environmental, social and moral foundations of indigenous knowledge. The way in which indigenous wisdom is portrayed in the text undermines binary thinking around issues around culture and nature, human and animal or physical and spiritual

The approach in this paper is to apply a multidisciplinary analytical framework informed by ecocritical theory, postcolonial studies and environmental ethics to explore how The Black Hill constructs its triadic thematic structure. This research aims at addressing, among others, the following questions: First, how does the novel depict the relationship between environmental degradation and social disruption? Second, in what way do indigenous ethical systems as articulated in the text differ from dominant environmental ethics? Third, how does narrative position traditional ecological knowledge as a resource for contemporary environmental challenges? By investigating these questions, this paper intends to contribute to fast-growing scholarly conversation about indigenous environmental literature while shedding light on specific literary strategies Dai employs in an effort to convey her ecological vision.

The outline of this paper will be as follows: Section 2 will outline the relevant scholarship in realm of ecocriticism, indigenous environmental thought and Northeast Indian writing. Section 3 will be reserved for outlining theoretical framework and the methodology. Section 4 will be reserved for analysis. It will undertake an analysis of social factors, environmental factors and ethical factors separately before moving on to their interconnections. Section 5 will be reserved for discussing the findings vis-à-vis the current debate over the environment. Section 6 will conclude with concluding thoughts on novel's contributions to the realm of environmental writing.

## **2. Literature Review**

### **2.1 Ecocriticism and Indigenous Environmental Thought**

Ecocriticism, as an area of study in literature, has undergone significant developments since its inception in the 1990s, ranging from its initial association with nature writing and romantic poetry to its current status, where it encompasses a wide range of cultural production and perspectives. According to Buell (2005), first-wave ecocriticism was primarily involved in celebrations and critiques of nature exploitation, whereas second-wave ecocriticism incorporates issues of environmental justice, postcolonialism, and/or indigenous ecology. There is now an increasing awareness of the fact that environmental issues cannot be addressed without due considerations for power, inequality, and cultural differences.

There are significant challenges and opportunities in the environmental thought of indigenous peoples from the perspective of ecocritical studies. Unlike environmental philosophies of the West, which often create a dichotomy of nature and humans, indigenous worldview integrates humans into a web of kinship relations with nature (Kimmerer, 2013). Implications of this worldview for environmental ethics are enormous, as obligations and duties rather than rights and resources form the basis of paradigm of interaction with nature. Environmental knowledge of indigenous peoples, according to Whyte (2018) is not just alternative but fundamentally different epistemologies from those of dominant environmental discourse.

This has also brought indigenous perspectives to field of ecocriticism, compelling a reconsideration of important concepts such as wilderness, preservation and sustainability. Todd (2016) illustrates how colonial conservation frequently removed indigenous peoples from lands in the name of protecting nature thereby laying bare political dimensions of supposedly neutral environmental categories. This critique rhymes with postcolonial ecocritical work such as DeLoughrey and Handley 2011 work which explores how imperial projects across history are both exploitation of humans and destruction of the environment, thereby making continuous legacies in shaping contemporary ecological crises.

### **2.2 Literature from Northeast India: Contexts and Concerns**

Literature from India Northeast region holds a complex place in larger scenario of India literature with dominant themes of geographical marginalization, cultural uniqueness and complex alignments with Indian nation-state. According to Misra (2011), Northeast authors often

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find themselves situated between various identities such as indigenous, Indian and Asian, while dealing with issues peculiar to their environmentally abundant yet politically sensitive home terrain. This literature has also received substantial scholarly attention with respect to dealing with environmental issues due to the sensitivity of the region as an ecologically abundant hotspot.

Mamang Dai body of work is an embodiment of such qualities and also goes far beyond a regionalist classification by virtue of its content with universal themes. Nath (2019) situates Dai as an important writer in contemporary Indian ecocriticism, emphasizing the sophistication and depth with which Dai handles the effects of modernization on traditional ecological practices and the lack of positive alternatives offered by modernization practices. Mamang Dai work is marked by its avoidance of romantic primitivism and developmentalist narratives.

Research on The Black Hill, particularly, has started to gain momentum, though it still remains limited compared to research based on Dai's poetry or her earlier novel, The Legends of Pensam (2006). Borgohain (2017) work discusses the memory of the landscape, which forms a significant component of the novel, with geographical elements described as carrying cultural deposits of memory. Devi (2020) has critically analyzed the gender dimension of the novel, describing the ill-effects of environmental damage on women's roles based on their position as farmers and custodians of knowledge. However, no focused research has yet been conducted on the central theme of the novel's integrated ideology of social, ethical, and environmental concerns.

### 2.3 Environmental Ethics and Social Justice

The interface between issues of environmental concerns and social justice, therefore, has become more significant, especially concerning academic scholarship, as well as activist movements. According to Schlosberg (2007), environmental justice has been defined by the imperative of ensuring distributive fairness, the acknowledgment of diverse values and active participation in processes of decision-making. Thus, there is a need to question simplistic understandings of the term "environmentalism" based on the preservation of the environment without due regard to the issue of distribution.

Nixon notion of slow violence is an important lens for understanding environmental degradation among indigenous peoples. While spectacular crises will immediately capture the imagination of the media and the

general public, slow violence speaks to the processes of environmental degradation that occur over long periods of time. This is problematic from a number of perspectives, as the narratives and political systems that seek to counter crises of spectacular violence are, by themselves, unable to counter the problem of slow violence.

In the context of literary portrayal of human-environment interaction, especially regarding their moral dimensions, environmental virtue ethics stands out as another productive approach that scholars such as Sandler 2007 have developed. Virtue ethics does not strictly reduce morality to a matter of actions alone or to consequences. On the contrary, it underlines the importance of character traits and dispositions such as wisdom, temperance, respect that dispose individuals toward appropriate conduct with respect to the environment. Thus, this trend echoes quite well in those indigenous moral frameworks that consider relationality and responsibility as privileged notions rather than abstract principles or utilitarian calculus.

### 3. Methodology

Research utilizes a multidisciplinary analytical framework to apply ecocritical theory, postcolonial theory, and environmental ethics to The Black Hill. The study's theoretical framework acknowledges that "postcolonial environments lead to the search for a particularly nuanced and sophisticated form of analytical tool." research will be informed by a form of postcolonial ecocriticism that draws on the work of Huggan and Tiffin (2015), and it explores "the way that environmental degradation is represented as inextricably linked to colonial past or to processes of marginalization."

The methodological strategy adopted will entail a critical analysis of certain key aspects of the text, such as selected text, character, plot and symbolic imagery, found in The Black Hill. By using Buell's methodological guidelines for criticism as set out in his work on Environmental Criticism (2005), the critical analysis will entail, among other things, such considerations as: (1) the representation of non-human nature, (2) the promotion of environmental consciousness, (3) human accountability, and (4) whether or not environmental themes are shown as being legitimate or simply used metaphorically to describe human themes.

Additionally, study draws on a range of environmental virtue ethics theory (Sandler, 2007) in its consideration of the ways in which novel represents moral character in relation to environmental conduct. This includes an

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exploration of the virtues promoted in the narrative and the ways in which the characters relations to the land speak to their ethical character. The approach also considers narrative strategies in the work, such as the multiperspectival technique and the interweaving of temporal and oral tradition components.

To understand triadic relationship between social, ethical and environmental themes, this research makes use of thematic coding techniques and finds areas within narrative that address social structures and relationships, environmental description and interactions with nature, and ethical reflection or moral judgment to shed light on the authors holistic view of interconnected social, ecological and moral orders.

## **4. Analysis: Social, Ethical and Environmental Dimensions**

### **4.1 Environmental Themes: Land as Living Entity**

The Black Hill opens immediately to establish the nature of the eponymous hill as not merely setting, but protagonist. Thus, we get from the text: "The hill had been there forever. It was black because it held all the secrets of the earth" (Dai, 2014, 3). Note the degree to which this kind of personification transcends trope to become a legitimate expression of the Adi worldview, wherein the elements themselves possess consciousness and interact dialectically with human populations.

The richness of the novel's environmental imagination centers on several scales ranging from the seasonal calendar that influences agricultural activities to geological time scales that far exceed the duration of human history. Such scaled richness problematizes anthropocentric concepts of time, situating human activity within the broader ecological processes. The text explains that "the river changed course every hundred years, and the forest moved imperceptibly, tree by tree, generation by generation" (Dai, 2014, p. 47), thereby coupling the dynamic natural world with the hubristic attempts of humans to impose order on the world.

Environmental degradation in novel takes place through various means such as deforestation in the name of timber harvesting, mining that destroys the hillsides, and the polluting effects of rivers as chemicals are dumped by industrial processes and monoculture practices that drain the fertility from the land. However, Dai avoids showing these impacts in dramatic and visual ways and instead shows the incremental erosion of the land and its effects that Nixon calls "slow violence." The novel shows the incremental processes that transform the environment and make certain practices impossible. When the timber

harvesters chop down the forests, they remove not only the timber but also the herbs, hunting spots, and sacred sites that are significant to the Adi tribe.

Authors discussion of biodiversity is indicative of high levels of environmental understanding. Dai lists local flora with exceptional biological diversity, including rare orchids, endemic birds, diverse fish while also showing how this diversity is supported by various habitat factors while simultaneously indicating how it is related to complex food web. One would even infer that the author disputes the simplistic methods of conservation of species. When mining activity interferes with the hydrological cycle of a stream, it would impact the entire basin because of the interlinking of species.

### **4.2 Social Themes: Community, Change, and Displacement**

The Black Hill portrays the social organization of the Adi community from a fundamentally ecological perspective: their community structures were aligned and impacted in consideration of the mountainous topography. The traditional governance structures of the community have inbuilt environmental stewardship as their central responsibility. The novel also clearly portrays these structures not just as primitive governance structures but as sophisticated mechanisms for the sustainable management of resources based on centuries of observation and experimentation.

Social upheaval in the narrative directly correlates to change in the environment. As the effects of the outside economy infiltrate the region first for colonial use, then for tiers of development, social relationships become untenable. As indicated in the text, wage work in the timber camps leads young men to abandon agricultural labor and, in turn, allows fields to go untended and knowledge to be mislaid. "The boys who went to the forest camps forgot the songs that call the rice to grow," Dai tells in the narrative, "and when they returned, the old men no longer knew who they were" (Dai, 2014, p. 112). This section of the text shows the way in which changes to the environment lead to dislocation and upheaval in social understandings.

The novel also examines the issue of gender and environmental and social changes. The role of women in gardening and seedkeeping is portrayed as pivotal to the holding of environmental knowledge. Due to the environmental changes and commercialization of forests through timbering, women have to venture deeper into the forests in search of firewood. Commercialization of forests results in the decline of environmental resources

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and leads to the marginalization of women. The experiences of Gimur's wife and her traditional agriculture are exploited for the illustration of the nature of environmental knowledge. Gimur is shown mocking women who are still sticking to traditional agriculture. Migration is portrayed as the result and generator of socio-environmental change. While characters migrate to different places in search of knowledge, jobs, and environmental betterment, the migration itself deteriorates community resilience to withstand exploitative growth. In other words, the novel portrays an ascending cycle of environmental deterioration prompting migration, which in turn makes communities vulnerable to growth, which further makes them incapable of protecting the environment, and hence the cycle of migration continues. This is reminiscent of current scholarship on climate migration (Adger et al., 2014), providing evidence that literature can shed light upon complex causations.

### **4.3 Ethical Themes: Responsibility, Reciprocity, and Transgression**

The environmental ethics proposed by Black Hill is based on the concepts of reciprocity and responsibility, and not on rights and utility. The Adi ideology of viewing the relation between humans and nature, as described in the novel, is that of obligation, wherein giving back to nature is essential in conjunction with taking from nature. This approach has been inherently different from anthropocentric and biocentric ethics, which are based on seeing nature as subservient to human beings and the development of rights in nature, respectively, and moving instead towards relational ethics.

Concept of transgression in novel works on multiple levels. Environmental transgressions of desecrating sacred groves, killing specific species of animals and disturbing locations have spiritual and practical implications. Novel illustrates how "when the miners blasted hill's face, the rains came wrong and crops failed for three years" (Dai, 2014, p. 156), which highlights environmental retribution but in no way links it to idea of divine retribution. The indigenous taboos are treated as codified and perfected environmental understanding rather than superstition.

Characters in novel are judged on their environmental virtue-their ability to perceive, comprehend and behave properly with respect to nonhuman nature. Gimur, the novel moral polestar, reveals environmental wisdom: he observes closely, consumes resources sparingly, and pays

attention to seasonal signs. His nemesis, the logging contractor Hoxo, personifies environmental vice: avarice, myopia and instrumental rationality that reduces forest to board-feet and rivers to transportation routes. This characterization allows Dai to assert that the roots of environmental dilemmas are ethical dilemmas, one of character rather than knowledge or technological limitation.

Another important ethical element is the intergenerational responsibility. It is interesting to note that the novel treats the aspect of environmental responsibility as one that is not only meant for the present generations, as in the form of producing and consuming, but also as a responsibility that entails future generations. The elders in the story talk of the responsibility of "holding the land in trust" and of "keeping faith with those not yet born" (Dai, 2014, p. 203). This, in essence, is an ethics of environmental responsibility that covers the temporal dimension, which is mostly ignored in the present approach that favors immediate economic benefits and disregards future consequences.

### **4.4 Thematic Intersections: The Triadic Framework**

The analytical potential of The Black Hill lies in its attempt to transcend the idea of the environment, social issues, and ethics as dislocated concepts. The novel aims at exposing the audience to the reality of how all of these elements form a single system within the world of the story so that a change in one of the areas is inevitable in the others. Degradation of the environment, therefore, is not just a loss of aesthetic appeal but a complete undermining of the social structure and ethics, and vice versa.

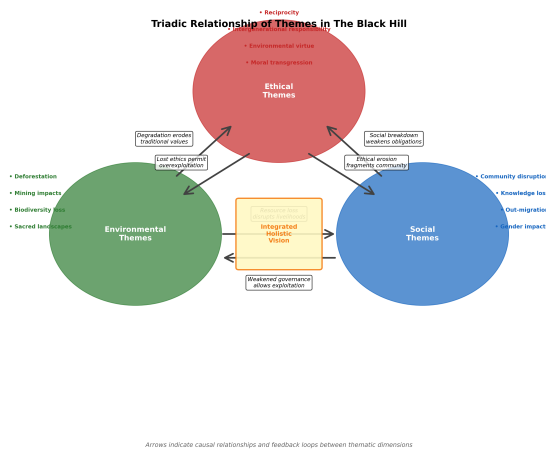
This triadic relationship is perhaps seen best in the novel's exploration of the realm of sacred geography. There are certain areas of the physical landscape that are at once resources, such as areas for finding water or materials for construction, social locations, such as areas to gather or to mark space, and areas for exemplifying ethics, such as spaces of ritual obligation. When such spaces are harmed or destroyed, the repercussions are felt across all three areas. The damage done to the physical space of the sacred grove is seen to threaten not just its role in biological life, but its roles in social meetings.

Knowledge transmission offers another important point of intersection. The traditional ecological knowledge presented in the novel is, at one and the same time, environmental knowledge (understanding plant phenology, animal behavior, weather), social knowledge

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(transmitted through apprenticeship, embedded in social groups), and moral knowledge (teaching relationships, promoting virtues). As environments change, as forests disappear, rivers dry up, and species disappear, this knowledge will become both more important and harder to pass on. The novel, then, offers a tragic irony just as indigenous environmental knowledge could hold key environmental lessons, it is being destroyed as a means of transmission.

Figure 1 below highlights how these three thematic dimensions converge in terms of interconnectedness as seen in The Black Hill novel, demonstrating how changes in environment lead to corresponding social changes that create an opportunity for further deterioration of environment.



**Figure 1: Triadic Relationship of Themes in The Black Hill**

In Figure 1, the reader will see that the three thematic domains are not only illustrated as being on parallel tracks, they are also fundamentally intertwined. Environmental degradation such as deforestation, mining and pollution has a direct effect on social structures, as it interferes with subsistence living and can cause communities to be displaced. This, in turn, has an effect on ethical systems, as values and social contracts can be difficult to maintain. Once again, it is shown that breaking any of these pieces of the cycle has far-reaching consequences on the entire system, as evidenced in the novel.

## 5. Discussion: Implications and Contemporary Relevance

Analytical Findings of \*The Black Hill\* with Implications for Environmental Discourse. The

analytical findings of \*The Black Hill\* have important implications for present discourse concerning environmental issues. In the present environmental discourse, efforts are made to deal with environmental issues in isolation from social issues and both of these concerns in isolation from issues of ethics. However, the analytical study of \*The Black Hill\* reveals that if the issue of environmental degradation/socio-cultural disruption/ethical degeneration can be treated as an integrated phenomenon, efforts towards solution can also be made in an integrated manner.

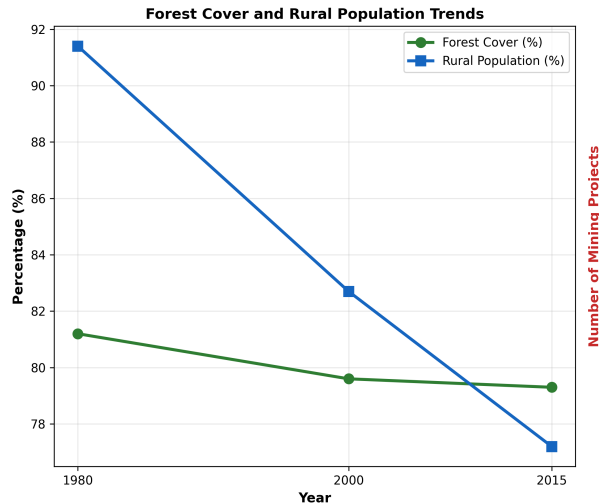
That the novel points to indigenous knowledge systems can be related to various considerations in environmental science and policy, which have recently pointed out the value of traditional knowledge in this context. Recent studies have shown that indigenous-managed landscapes can be more biodiverse and resilient than protected areas from which indigenous people have been excluded (Fa et al., 2020). The Black Hill speaks into this considerable subject by pointing not merely to what indigenous knowledge is, but how it works not as factors of information and data, but as ecological observations, social practices and ethical disciplines as a whole. That is, environmental attempts that involve traditional knowledge need not merely draw on useful data and facts in it, but also attempt to engage its social and ethical dimensions.

Novel portrayal of environmental displacement/migration is very relevant to contemporary global issues. With environmental changes due to climate change and other factors, some areas have become uninhabitable, forcing people to migrate (McLeman, 2018). While The Black Hill considers the social and cultural aspects of environmental migration, it adds value to the issue, which is otherwise discussed from the social and demographic aspects. It is depicted that environmental displacement is not a logistical issue but a social and ethical one.

The theme of intergenerational responsibility, which is embedded in the novel, has implications with respect to climate ethics. One of the challenges posed by climate change is that its worst effects will be felt in the future by generations that do not, and cannot, participate in the decisions made in the present. The theme of land held in trust beyond those as yet born reflects an ethic of temporal solidarity, which disrupts prevailing habitual ways of thinking in terms of economy, where there is scope for discounting temporal distance.

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Figure 2: Comparative data for environmental degradation indicators in Arunachal Pradesh over the period covered by the novel's historical purview-informs the real-world basis upon which Dai grounds her literary representation.



**Figure 2: Environmental Change Indicators in Arunachal Pradesh (1980-2015)**

Source: Compiled from Forest Survey of India reports (1987, 2001, 2017) and State Statistical Handbooks

The information provided in Figure 2 helps to understand the changing environment related to the picture presented in *The Black Hill*. While the change related to forest cover loss appears insignificant, the total area being transformed has strong implications for biodiversity and native lives. The sudden escalation of mining activities and related loss of biodiversity highlight the increasing rates of environmental changes, which have provided the background to the story of Dai. The reduction of the rural population relates to the migration trends mentioned in the novel.

## 6. Conclusion

The value of the present research is that it has shown that "Mamang Dai: *The Black Hill*" reflects a rich amalgamation of various elements related to the environment, society, and ethics that constitute a truly 'holistic' vision of the relationships between humankind and nature. This novel cannot be studied in isolation and reflects the links and intersections between the environment, society, and ethics that constitute an interconnected system and cannot be compartmentalized. Within this analysis of the textual data, it is revealed that the "Dai" version of Adi environmental knowledge is not only based on different facts about the way the world is but also on distinct epistemological and ethical models of

the world. The concept of indigenous knowledge in the novel is understood to simultaneously inhabit the realms of the environmental, the social, and the ethical in a way that is not neatly compartmentalized in Western perspectives. The whole knowledge system of the indigenous peoples is present in the way they relate to the landscape and in the way they transmit it from generation to generation and offer models of sustainability.

The ethics of environmental relations, as highlighted in the novel, center on the concepts of reciprocity and responsibility rather than rights and the pursuit of utilitarianism. This form of ethics places humans within the framework of a web of responsibilities. This form of ethics undermines anthropocentric approaches, including the anthropocentric perspectives of nature and limited approaches to conservation, including the lack of social issues in such approaches. *The Black Hill* implies that virtues are necessary in caring for the environment, including the cultivation of virtues such as attentiveness, restraint, and respect.

There are some limitations of this study, which need to be addressed. One of the major limitations of this study lies in its limited textual analysis of the novel with regard to ethnographic findings on the environmental practices of the Adi community, as well as limited analysis of other writings on similar issues from other indigenous groups. A detailed analysis of the similarities and differences between Dai's representation of issues in her novel, as actually observed from Adi adaptations, would make for fruitful research. Furthermore, though this research undertakes some analysis of gender aspects, a more detailed analysis from a feminist perspective could further bring to light aspects of the differences that climate change has brought to women.

The relevance of the subject of the paper extends well beyond the purely literary: if environmental issues are socially and ethically as well as technologically or biologically constituted, then the solutions will necessarily involve the same interrelations. *The Black Hill* spells out the ways in which the indigenous peoples have cultivated a sophisticated approach to the interrelation of the social and environmental over the generations, and how environmental politics today could usefully engage with such approaches rather than repudiating them as primitive or metaphorical. The novel thus works both as a kind of cultural archive, safekeeping a tradition at risk of loss, and as a prophecy of the consequences of disconnection.

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Conclusion, The Black Hill is an important piece of environmental literature, as it provides a universally applicable discussion of the way in which environmental, social, and ethical issues combine as a single entity. Dai's story clearly proves the effectiveness of the representation of complex phenomena, which cannot be explained by scientific and policy models. Indeed, as nature of environmental issues grows in urgency around the world, voices like Dai, who can address this broad concern from an indigenous perspective become increasingly important.

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