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THE BOOK REVIEW

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Traditions that Reflect Collective Memory

Parvin Sultana

ESCAPING THE LAND

By Mamang Dai
Speaking Tiger, 2021, pp. 312, ₹599.00

THE INHERITANCE OF WORDS: WRITINGS FROM ARUNACHAL PRADESH

Edited by Mamang Dai
Zubaan, 2021, pp. 198, ₹495.00

Mamang Dai, the Sahitya Akademi Award winning author is one of the most prolific voices from Arunachal Pradesh as well as the region of the North East. Her works have delved deeply into the transitions that the State of Arunachal Pradesh has gone through from time to time, including the administrative changes which first treated the region as a 'frontier' in the wilderness and then a resourceful unexplored area waiting to be 'harnessed'.

Mamang Dai's earlier works like *The Black Hill* engaged with the colonial past of the State as well as the role of missionaries and their relationship with the tribes. It also focused on inter-tribe conflicts. The two books under review deal with slightly different issues. *Escaping the Land* is a political novel which follows the trajectory of the State and its journey from a Union Territory to a full-fledged State and the tumultuous politics it found itself involved in after.

It is the story of a people who might have drifted away from their homes and hearths, but the calling never stops. It starts with an account of a violent encounter that took place in 1953 between the Army of the newly Independent Indian state and a local tribe in far-flung Aching Mori. The encounter left 47 officers of the Assam Rifles dead. The new Republic came face to face with the challenge of bringing these hostile tribes within the fold of the administration.

“While *Escaping the Land* gives voice to a people who longingly look at their past, the anthology brings together women who also aspire to a more equal and just future.”

What the tribes faced on the other hand was the silent aggression of 'sarkari' laws and rules that were alien to their ways of life.

The land of Kojum Koja, a sacred place beyond time and where it all began came face to face with the administrative set up and new rules of a Republic itself churning in its birth pain. This is where the role of 'tribal' officers like Lipun became important. They worked as bridges between the tribes as well as the new Government. Educated in Shillong, officers like him played a crucial role in easing the State into the new political set up.

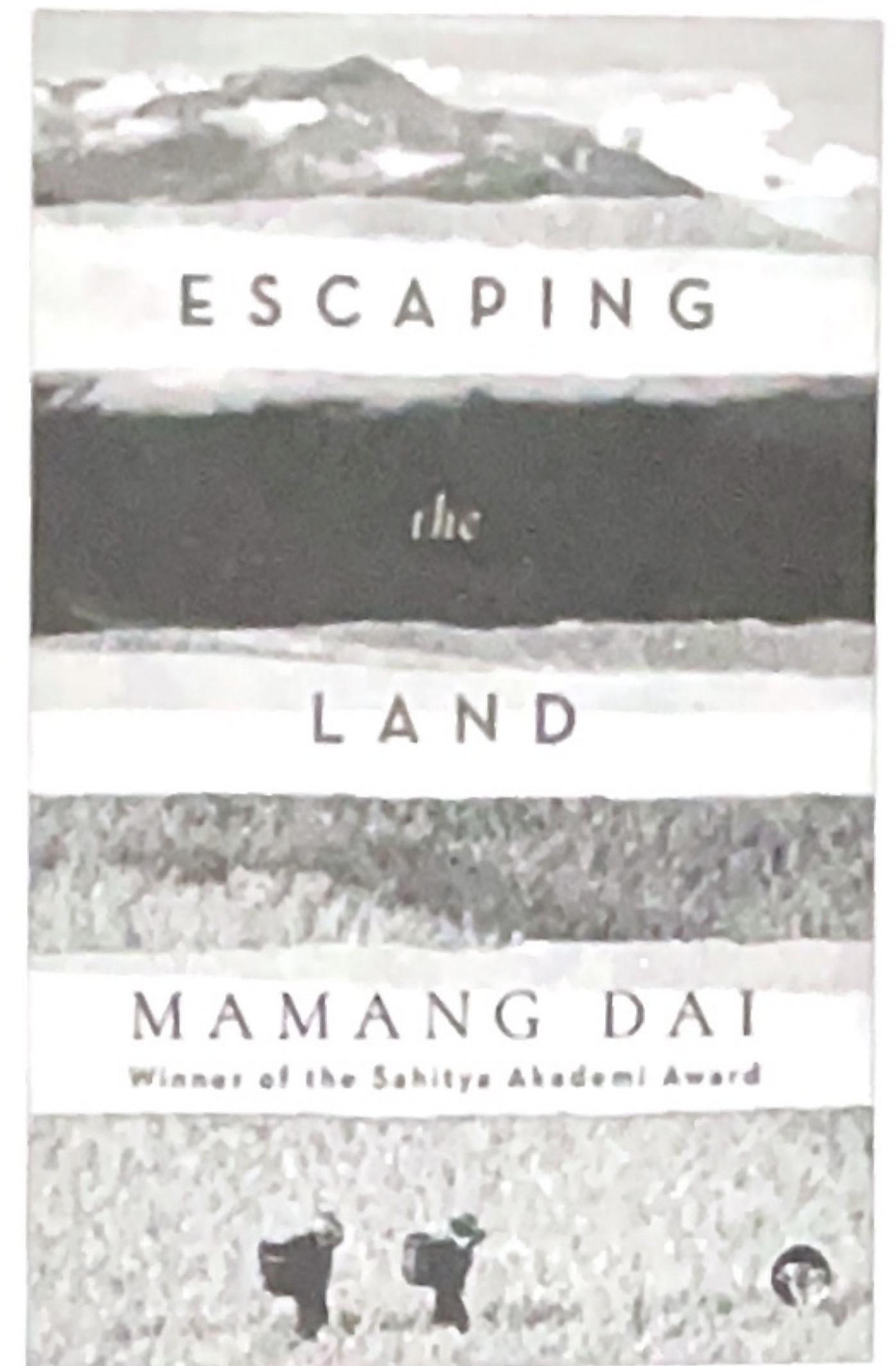
However, this was soon followed by onslaughts of new impositions—be it the issue of resettlement of Chakma-Hajong refugees or the growing timber mafia-backed extortion. The political journey of the State collides with the life of Lotur, someone who strongly supported the demand of separate Statehood but later became disillusioned by the political developments that took place. We also meet Maying, a young woman who stayed away from the State for a very long time but then returned to understand the changes as well as to document it.

Mamang Dai weaves a fantastic story. This is a region strengthened by stories and held together by traditions that reflect collective memory. Traditions of shamans, rain men and unknown powers which bestow good or bad will on the people are a part of their belief system.

After a few decades or so, as Lipun looks back on what he and others like him started, the landscape of politics along with the State have changed manifold. Is this what he and others like him hoped for? A State caught in the whirlwind of divisive politics—regions within the State like Tirang and Tuensang demanding Union Territory status, politics and political leaders being financed by land and forest mafia. Even fratricidal killings have pushed the State into an era of violence.

Through the characters of Lipun and Lotur, we go on a nostalgic trip. Dai also brings a collage of interesting women characters in the book. We meet Umsi who decided to 'escape' the land but could not escape the pull of the State or her past with Lotur. Lipun's wife Nefa named after the newly-formed Union Territory portrays another side of life—a life rendered unhappy.

The Inheritance of Words: Writings from Arunachal Pradesh, an anthology edited by Mamang Dai, brings together diverse voices from different tribes across the State in various forms—prose, short stories, poetry, a graphic novel as well as various art forms. A power-packed work where women from



different walks of life give voice to their thoughts, Mamang Dai transfers us to a time before time, where various stories and myths about a language with no written script are passed on across generations.

The anthology brings together works of Arunachali women writing in English and Hindi. We come across young poets who are working on perhaps their first collection. The short stories by these authors give a gendered peek into the lives and concerns of the people. Shamanistic traditions through their hymns are recounted in the piece by Mishimbu Miri titled 'Revelations from Idu Mishima Hymns' which is a first-hand account as she is the daughter of an Igu or a Shaman priest. The strong connection between culture and tradition that goes beyond this world is discussed in this piece.

Some powerful works of poetry by Tunung Taming, Jamuna Bini and others reflect on the alleged assumptions of liberated tribal women. While reflecting on traditions like bride price, works of fiction as well as poetry expose how bride price works as a bondage of women. Ponung Ering Angu's 'Among the Voices in the Dark' deals with the fall-out of such a tradition. Women caught in loveless and abusive marriages have no way out as poor families cannot return the bride price. Yelam's death in the story shows the dark side of a tradition which on one hand romanticizes women but on the other hand, commodifies her.

Karry Padu's photo essay, 'I am Property' furthers this view of how even tribal women have to bear the baggage of identity in the form of the tribe's honour. Women in these tribes are treated as belonging to the