

Creating New Borderlines: Women and Marginality in Mamang Dai's Novel 'Stupid Cupid'

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Abstract

The paper strives to understand women of North East India through the women characters of Mamang Dai's *Stupid Cupid*. It analyzes the status and problems of the North East women living in mainstream India, whose position in Indian society is multi-layered, with the help of neoliberal perspective. Socio-economic aspects of life of a woman may seem to liberate her but to what extent, is what Dai has beautifully presented in her Novel. It is also an attempt to explore the myth of woman empowerment in North East India.

Keywords: Women, City, Identity, Neoliberalism, North East

Published in 2009 by Penguin Books India, Mamang Dai's novel *Stupid Cupid*, is a trend setter among the works of literature produced from Northeast India. Although it is a story centered in Delhi, it has transcended all geographical boundaries in portraying women from various parts of the Eastern Himalayan Region spanning from Darjeeling, Siliguri and covering the entire Terai region, all the way up to Arunachal Pradesh. *Stupid Cupid* talks about the transforming image of womanhood in modern India, represented by super-advanced global metropolitan culture against the perpetually neglected backdrop of rural culture, as these women constantly struggle against various kinds of oppressions based upon their race, ethnicity and sex both in the urban and the rural space. Their struggles bind them together no matter whether they are from Darjeeling, Siliguri, Dimapur, Guwahati or Itanagar.

It seems relevant to mention here that there has always been a Heideggerian *Mitsein*, or 'being-with-others', in the relationship between women and men. In her book *The Second Sex*, Simone de Beauvoir argues that 'to be' a woman should be interpreted in the dynamic Hegelian sense of 'to have become', which explains how women have never been consistently positioned as 'Other' in the same way as other marginalized groups and they have always been the 'Absolute Others'.¹

They (women) have no past, no history, no religion of their own [. . .] they live dispersed among the males, attached through residence, housework, economic condition, and social standing to certain men – fathers or husbands – more firmly than they are to other women. If they belong to the bourgeoisie, they feel solidarity with men of their class, not with proletarian women; if they are white, their allegiance is to white men, not negro women [. . .] the bond that unites her [woman] to her oppressors

¹ Simone de. Beauvoir, "The Second Sex Introduction," in *Feminist Theory Reader: Local and Global perspectives*, ed. Carole McCann, and Sung-gyong Kim (New York: Routledge, 2003)

is not comparable to any other. The division of the sexes is a biological fact, not an event in human history.²

Rather human history being a coercive construct vested with a consciousness which is male dominated, ignores the fates of women, as the power struggles which shape history always occur between men. However, tribal societies around the world are celebrated for their egalitarian treatment of women, which is perhaps the reason why, while talking about women from India's North East, we often forget the immense heterogeneity of the tribes in the regions. Anungla Aier in her article 'Folklore, folk Ideas and gender among the Nagas' enumerates that in the last few decades, spread of education among women has led to general freedom and authority which has contributed to the misconception that women from these regions enjoy higher status.³ Patricia Mukhim also in her essay 'Landownership among the Khasis of Meghalaya: A gender perspective' has mentioned that although women from these regions appear more mobile and visible to the rest of India who consider them as a matrilineal society, in actuality these women have never been recognized as equal to men.⁴ But if we examine customary laws regarding women's rights and day today practice, as in Dr. (Mrs.) Gina Shangkhams study on 'Gender in relations to Tribal culture with special reference to the Nagas and Manipur' it becomes clear that women are far from equal even in the North East.⁵ Most of these societies are patrilineal societies where the structure of the relationship between the genders normally gets the legal sanction through institutions such as the customary laws. The scheme of identity construction in these societies is based on clan membership, and the woman occupies a less significant position in them as she finds her identity and responsibility shifted to that of the husband's clan after marriage. Mamang Dai in her novel *Stupid Cupid* shows the traditional gendering of spaces and spheres in these societies, where the women are expected to derive their sense of meaning and happiness from association with their family. Those women who trespass the rules laid down by society are disowned or looked down with contempt as in the case of Adna's aunt. However, men were not bound by such familial ties and polygamy was a natural practice in Adna's tribe. This has led to a constant tension between individualism and relationality among women. Not only is the woman constantly sacrificing her own well being for the sake of the family but limitation is placed even on her dreams, hobbies and her access to knowledge. In the novel, Mareb had seen her mother sew lace on table cloth but had never known that her mother was an avid reader except only during her last few days - 'Perhaps she had hidden her heart'. Even her contact with her maternal home was restricted by her new family. Mareb's mother adhered to the gender roles prescribed by society and occupied only those spaces. She looked after the household obeying the instructions of her husband. But despite her complete dedication, her husband's relationship with her was bereft of any depth. His

² Beauvoir, *The Second Sex* Introduction.

³ Tilottoma Mishra, *The Oxford Anthology of Writings from North-East India: Poetry and essays*, (Oxford University Press, 2011), 306.

⁴ *Ibid.*, 286.

⁵ Gina Shangkhams, "Gender in Relation to tribal culture with special reference to the Nagas in Manipur," in *Scheduled Tribes of North-East India and Development*, ed. Tiba Th R (New Delhi: B.R. Publishing Corp. 2010).

second marriage just after her death reflects his insensitivity and lack of commitment towards his family. In a study conducted by Moirangthem Tineshowri Devi in 'Is Reproduction and Child Health Programme addressing the needs of Adolescent girls' Health? A Study in Manipur', an in-depth interviews with 100 girls at the age group of 15-19 years in Manipur, reported that adolescent girls from this region, experienced not only restrictions from society and family in many ways but also get exploited.⁶ Thus, we can say that women in these communities are still imprisoned by the internal structures of their communities.

However, since the last decade of the twentieth century, the social, political and economic realities of contemporary India, has been changing very rapidly. Mohsin Hamid in his essay "The Chronicle Online" has asserted that there is now a post-post-colonial generation, who never had a colonial experience.⁷ Women who were depicted as victims and objects of description in colonial and post colonial studies are getting a new makeover in literature as 'global capitalism' has given a materialist turn to postcolonial studies. Global capitalism, which is the other name for Neoliberal globalization is the present reality of the world. India joined the bandwagon of economic liberalization in the year 1991, when the then Finance Minister Manmohan Singh made major changes in the economic policies, transforming the country from a proto-socialist, mixed economy advocated by India's first Prime Minister Nehru, to a neoliberal economy that allowed more Foreign Direct Investment and lesser regulations on global trade. Consequently, the country's growing economic power has also caused upheaval in its social fabric and the changing social conditions have led to a significant transformation in the aesthetic representation of indigeneity as well.

Mamang Dai's novel *Stupid Cupid* marks the rise of a new generation of indigenous writers who are preoccupied by the country's expanding, imperial future, and they are looking to find meaning and direction in it, for so long marginalized sections, especially the indigenous women. So far, indigenous and mainstream literature had remained apart but the contemporary neoliberal urban space has led to the emergence of a genre where we find common themes like migration and cosmopolitan identity in both. Thus, it seems unjustified to separate mainstream literature and literature from the margins. In the light of the above discussion I have tried to present the emergence of new indigenous novel through *Stupid Cupid* which has in a way, also become a metonymy for the emerging new India itself.

The primary objectives of the paper are to analyze, first, the novel's representation of new modes of neoliberal subjectivity that empowers North East migrant women in post-liberalization India, second, the representation of the expanding city that forces people from disparate groups together to become the breeding ground for criminality and thus, the safety of women in this increasingly criminalized urban space, and third,

⁶ Moirangthem Devi Tineshowri, "Is Reproduction and Child Health Programme Addressing the Needs of Adolescent Girls' Health? A study in Manipur," in *Scheduled Tribes of North-East India and Development*, ed. Tiba Th R (New Delhi: B.R. Publishing Corp. 2010)

⁷ Swaralipi Nandi, *Narrating the New India: Globalization and Marginality in Post-Millennium Indian Anglophone Novels*, (Kent State University, 2012).

the representation of ecosystem depletion in North East India in the wake of post-liberalization India and its correlation with repression of women.

Neoliberal Subjectivity

Neo-liberalism has moved on from being just a set of economic policies to a way of life that restructures the social and individual identities of the citizens into a new mode of neoliberal subjectivity. The essential traits of neoliberal subjectivity are – self-care, self-responsibility, fierce individualism, rejection of the community, potential to manipulate their surroundings, entrepreneurial skills and risk management.⁸ Taking its cue from the root ideology of nineteenth century ‘liberalism’, which lays utmost emphasis upon the concept of freedom, neoliberal globalization justifies itself through the strong private property rights, an unregulated market and its emancipatory effect. Here, it must be noted that a significant difference between liberalism and neo-liberalism is that, whereas the liberal subject had not applied to the marginalized, the poor and the excluded, in contemporary neo-liberal situation, the concept of subjectivity extends to those subjects who were not previously treated as citizens, as in the case of the indigenous women. Thus the immense significance of the notion of neoliberal subjectivity lies in its attempt to co-opt all citizens as the ideal subject for the market.

In *Stupid Cupid Dai*’s modern women from the margins accept migration and exile, for emancipation from oppressive structures of a rural society. The central narrative focuses on protagonist Adna’s passage from a small village in the North East as a journey from ravages of patriarchal oppression and constantly vigilant and curious village elders, to the freedom of anonymity and wealth, eventually projecting Adna as a self-made human being who takes up responsibility for her own welfare. The protagonist Adna has educated herself through taking up courses in hotel management from Guwahati and Kolkata. The newly empowered tribal woman Adna in Delhi takes up the responsibility of her own life and her well-being by starting her own business with the unexpected acquisition of her aunt’s bungalow in a posh area of Delhi near Jorbagh. At the very beginning of the novel, the name Adna had been mistaken for a male person, gravely underlining a prejudiced society that even today stereotypes gender roles. She manages her own ‘private enterprise’, a guest house named ‘Four Seasons’, the eccentric love agency for the couples and singles to come together, which comes with its own risks. Many people objected to her decision of transforming her aunt’s bungalow to a love agency but Adna the diehard romantic is ready to take the risk. She delays marriage to explore new possibilities in love and career and falls for an already married man from a mainstream community. Infact, Adna also becomes the entrepreneur ‘godmother’ for many underprivileged relatives from the periphery as well as other people from the underbelly of the urban space by giving them employment.

⁸ Nandi, *Narrating the New India*.

She is the postmodern woman who boldly asserts 'I thought, as if all the choices were before me and I could simply select what it was that I most wanted of life.' Adna believes that the onus of a neoliberal subject's prosperity depends on the ambitious protagonist herself, who must strive to rise above her inherited class by perseverance and by educating herself in the laws of capitalism and she follows this belief ardently throughout her stay in Delhi. She displays extraordinary managerial skills as she maintains moderate distance from her customers as well as her work force, except dealing in finance. She is the superior and supervisor, and she prefers to maintain that position. However, she is not free from constant turmoil within herself in her frequent attempts to adjust with the global capitalist ideology and learn the ropes of business. To belong to the city and adjust to the neoliberal modes of citizenship, several times she suppresses her soft feminine instincts and her traditional cultural background which had taught her to think from the heart rather than the head. Adna likes to define herself as 'I was city bred, single and female, with perhaps an adventurous streak' and she is full of reverence for her globe-trotting aunt who must have recognized her self-image in Adna 'because long ago she had left kith and kin behind to follow her desire and fall in love. We heard many names that were linked with her, but at the end she was single and childless.' Adna visualized an entirely new definition of happiness as she observes 'even though relatives . . . shook their heads whenever they remembered her, I sensed that my aunt has died happy'.⁹ Invisibly visible throughout the novel, this aunt plays a very important role as the role model and the progenitor of a new generation of women from the margins. By rejecting her community in her self-welfare, she had not only crossed the boundaries of her home, locality and region but she had crossed even the national border into an unknown realm. Her preference for this niece as her heir to the property only helps to prolong her breed.

Besides Adna, Mesochenla aka Green is another example of the perfect neoliberal subjectivity. Living within the cityscape, independently carrying on a flourishing business, choosing the kind of man with whom she would like to share her room as well as her life, volunteering for a drug rehabilitation center and also organizing cultural events back home to raise funds for her organization, she had no time for beauty schedules and was busy with more rewarding tasks than self-beautification. Her name suits her as she had an ever-green heart. Green with her multi-tasking abilities was trying to untie the knots left by the incomplete connection between the centre and the periphery. It is evident that the centre was almost always oblivious and negligent towards the presence of the various life-forms in the periphery. Green's comment, 'Everything is slipping out of our hands. . . There is strife and there are drugs'¹⁰ reflects deep decay among the youth of the region. By its Neoliberal policies the government had opened up national borders for facilitating the free flow of capital and goods and its obvious negative consequence was the free passage to drugs and heroine. The region was already suffering from political conflict and unemployment that had led to a deepening sense of purposelessness among the people. Men folk were draining away mentally and spiritually, giving in to drugs and corruption. At the

⁹ Mamang Dai, *Stupid Cupid* (New Delhi: Penguin Books, 2009).

¹⁰ Dai, *Stupid Cupid*.

same time, in the state versus community conflict that spanned for almost the entire later half of the 20th century, men withdrew from civic life for compulsions of war and self-defense. In such a situation, the public sphere retreated into the private and women formed the civil societies. Many women like Green, assumed roles that were completely new to them and confronted and negotiated with the massive power of the state machinery in their everyday life. Many women were propelled into the public sphere for various socio-economic reasons and in the process their lives and identities as women were radically transformed.

Nederveen Pieterse's assertion that, "...conflicts not only divide but also unite humankind"¹¹ becomes particularly true for women from India's Northeast, as we find that the heightened political conflict in the region became a springboard for not only gender equality, liberating women from the bindings of a patriarchal society but at the same time leading to a greater unity among these multi-ethnic women. Obviously, Green's doors in her Mehrauli apartment in Delhi were always open and people from her hometown freely came and went. Her unflinching commitment for her own people and her active participation in the life of her community was making her another entrepreneur 'godmother' who at every opportunity, affectionately exclaimed 'Nothing like our own people, eh?' 'Green was stunning in her energy as she planned and plotted consignments of textiles, new patterns, thread, colour, design'.¹² The items that she traded in, 'red-and-black warrior shawls and bags, the heavy woven cloth, shawls for brave hunters and decorative shawls for women in all textures and colours and motifs of tigers and hornbills', had immense traditional significance. However, culture is nothing but a commodity in the modern world and Green had readily accepted the global consumer culture that neoliberalism had to offer. She was the new trader and she was making the most of what was available. This also held the assurance that newly liberated women like Green were making a livelihood. Green's tremendous love for food, her easy going ways, her constant presence in the market, with her tight jeans and glasses on -looking for ready change in her purse balanced on her knee etched the image of a modern women who 'was in a mission to make a living and she was busy, busy.'

Mareb, who had seen the many unconditional sacrifices of her mother, had also done away with all social taboos to first go against a tyrannous and greedy father and then go against a monotonous life with a husband who was obsessed with politics. Ironically, she becomes the true 'City woman' that her husband admiringly calls her as she makes him relent to her will and shift the entire family to Delhi to become part of the neoliberal progress. In her desperation for 'a different life' she even takes the bold step to return to her former lover - the globe-trotting businessman Rohit from the heart of the city, who was also waiting for her to return. Though her extra-marital affair appears villainous considering that she has a lovely daughter, yet, her desire to give love and happiness to everyone demands a deeper study of her intentions

¹¹ Roar Stein Mathisen, "Ethnic Identities in Global and Local Discourses: Contested Narratives of Sami Ethnic Heritage," in *Cultural Identity in Transition: Contemporary Conditions, Practices and Politics of a Global Phenomenon*, ed. Jari Kupiainen (Atlantic Publishers & Dist. 2004)

¹² Dai, *Stupid Cupid*.

which go beyond mere adultery. Through Mareb, Dai asserts that at a time when the neoliberal ideology was making the market forces to gradually regulate every sphere of the society, love was the only salvation for humans lost in the barren city which resembled 'a dome covered with dust and neon light.'

Adna's cousin Jia is another independent spirit who abandoned an abusive husband and left her village in the northeast to take a media refresher course in Delhi, and who 'in another life . . . might have been one of those famous women striding across our TV screens and speaking at world forums'.¹³ Jia is from a very humble background but she is independent as a local reporter and bold enough to call 'a spade a spade'. Her reports were about 'perspective' which underlines an impressive personality. In the city, she would often work on night shifts. 'Printers clicking and tapping and the new computer screens on and lit up all night', reflects the importance of media in this global capitalist world which is always on the go for more information and news. Jia in the city wonders how people's interests were shifting from feature writings in newspaper columns to 'stocks and the price of oil and sugar cane'. Terms like 'stocks' were unknown to the ordinary man even few years back but their popularity in recent times reflects the increasing importance of the market among the urban educated elite class post liberalization India. Thus neoliberalism can be seen as influencing human nature in general. Jia had her own batch of fans and admirers but she had no time for them as she was busy pursuing her goal. An invisible bond also tied Jia with the daily workforce around her. She was impressed by the dedication of the garbage cleaners and with the Rajasthan vegetable woman forming a solidarity that only people who work the land recognized. Thus, despite the global consumer culture of the metropolitan urban space, it at the same time helped to form a kind of subaltern solidarity where people were gradually forgetting their regional differences.

The stories of all these women echo the rhetoric of "India Shining" – the dream of a prosperous India that offers, opportunities for one and all to make it big in the new globalized India.

The Neoliberal City and the Criminal Subject

Through Jia's astonishment from the time that she had set her foot on Delhi, we are introduced to the materialist, money centered and fake world of the city that had a way of turning people around completely. 'Everything was the opposite here', where 'one could order and have everything done, food, laundry, beautification, provided there was money'.¹⁴ People had to have multiple faces in order to survive in the corrupt city. In fact Adna is shocked by the city woman Julie's assertion that love was nothing but a business and that money could buy even love. Lutyen's city Delhi is now the city of opulence and luxury, of consumption and capital flow that matches any other global city in terms of its glitz and amenities for the economically privileged. It was attracting multinationals and a crowd of middle class people aspiring for the elite

¹³ Ibid; 28.

¹⁴ Ibid., 27.

western urban experience in India. However, what remains invisible in this glitz and glamour is the story of the evicted urban poor. In this connection, Partha Chatterjee in 'Are Indian cities becoming bourgeois at last?' enumerated that, "even as public spaces are reclaimed for the general use of proper citizens, there is a proliferation of segregated and protected spaces for the elite consumption, elite lifestyles and elite culture."¹⁵

Dai depicts Delhi not only as the elite residential and commercial space that covers the expanse of the main city, a particularly telling example of the gentrification of Delhi is also found in the lavish resorts just outside the city, complete with swimming pools, manicured lawns and carefully maintained gyms, where rich people like Amine and Adna's friend, often go to breathe fresh air. These were actually large rural or semi-rural lands in 'undeveloped' villages now turned into more productive hubs for a money spinning generation. What remains untold in the story is that this conversion of rural lands into places of elite consumption necessarily accompanies a severe encroachment on agricultural lands and a gradual displacement of the farmers by the urban elite. At the same time, the development of the industrial zone in the Trans-Yamuna area, where Rohit's father had built his son's office dreaming of great success as the 'country was on the threshold of an economic boom'¹⁶ also contains the misfortune of the marginalized urban poor like Sheila and her auto rickshaw driver husband who lived on the other side of the Yamuna and to whom the 'city was very cruel'.¹⁷

Chatterjee opines that in the post-1990s period the emphasis upon development in big cities has turned away from the urban poor, towards improvement of infrastructure "in order to create conditions for the import of high technology and the new service industries"¹⁸, and therefore, "... while the new metropolis is globally connected, it is frequently locally disconnected from the large sections of its population who are functionally unnecessary and are often seen to be socially or politically disruptive."¹⁹ Thus, central to the notion of the gentrification of the urban space is the exclusion of the urban poor who, in their desperation take to criminality. The uneasy reference to the squalid narrow lane just behind the posh surroundings where Adna lived and her idea that the presence of the diplomats in her vicinity guaranteed her safety, testified to the fact that the state as the 'neoliberal nexus of power' (Nandi) in attempts to create conducive and safe conditions for the market, pushed the urban poor to the margins of the elite society, polarizing the urban spaces. The urban poor, thus excluded became useless and unproductive, therefore dangerous. The safety of women in the city under such circumstances is often put to question as Adna's boyfriend keeps reminding her

¹⁵ Partha Chatterjee, ed, "Are Indian cities becoming bourgeois at last?," in *The Politics of the governed: Reflections on Popular Politics in most of the World*, (Columbia: University Press, 2004).

¹⁶ Dai, *Stupid Cupid*.

¹⁷ Ibid, 37.

¹⁸ Chatterjee, Are Indian cities becoming bourgeois at last?

¹⁹ Ibid., 185, 186.

to keep the doors locked, not to keep money lying around and not to talk to strangers as 'they're all thugs'.²⁰

The condition of the northeast migrant women is most precarious as they not only suffered racial discrimination, but their morality is also almost always under question. At the same time, it is often argued that violence against women in the big cities is on the rise as more and more women are coming out of traditional roles and taking up responsibilities which have otherwise been male domain. Such periods of social transition are often marked with tension. Adna's inhibitions regarding the dead eyes of one of her workmen comes true as later, these are the people who murder her closest friend Amine for a petty sum of money. Amine though a peaceful homemaker, had often supervised the workers and even fired them from work if any negligence was found. Her involvement with the workers and her subsequent murder is a reminder of the numerous criminal cases in the heart of the city, where only the women are made victims.

After this incident Adna realizes that she was so much in love with the life of liberty, that she had forgotten about 'the hard and brittle business of living - the grime and rubbish dumps and the seething colonies that sizzled and sweated in the heat, flies and rotting fruit, and harsh words through the summer months. Fires and fights broke out every day. The pathetic shacks were gutted or smashed. People died. Men drank and ran amuck, driven to murderous rage in that wheeling sphere that was the city' (Dai). In great despair she left the city for the time being and went back to her native village to be healed from the multiple wounds of betrayal, in the lap of nature and her own people.

Globalization, Environment and the Women

The question of environment in the modern indigenous fiction constitutes the material reality of a changing India. Private foreign investment had increased manifold after the liberalization of the country and there had been growth in every sector but that growth was at the expense of many important and highly diverse ecosystems. The agitation by All Assam Students' Union during the latter half of the 1980s was a direct challenge thrown at the fundamental assumptions of the government about constructing a culture of consumerism that was growing and prospering at the expense of the environment and marginalized people.

As the country geared up for modernization, the states of the North-East were clamouring for attention from the Centre. The thrust was on infrastructure. More roads. More connectivity... in the foothills or Terai belt linking the frontier states with Assam... Sometimes Mareb wondered how her father had managed to do all that - clear the wild jungles and smash mountains to drag roads across borders so that new settlements with new identities could spring up... this had happened all across the

²⁰ Dai, *Stupid Cupid*.

tangled forests and ravines of the north-eastern frontier states. Wherever a patch of forest needed to be cleared her father would be there.²¹

Mareb's father was one of the many businessmen and local entrepreneurs who dealt in multi-crore deals, throwing opulent parties for corrupt politicians and moneyed men to gain access to these deals and ran heavy machinery - the excavators and bulldozers across the length and breadth of the Himalayas destroying the entire ecosystem. Mareb's first visit to Delhi as a young student of literature was full of the dream of independence from that suffocating environment but her subsequent return and her tumultuous love marriage to the local chap Dayud, has something to do with her desire to undo the damage that her father had done to the eco-system of the region through his unquenchable greed for money. On her supposedly last trip from Delhi to her hometown to bid a final goodbye to her father and get back, she was stranded by torrential rain and mud slide that had destroyed the road constructed by her father. Mareb immediately realizes a deep solidarity with nature which, it appeared was conspiring with her to revolt against her father's tyranny. It was then that she met engineer Dayud who was quite an influential figure in politics and who 'had taken on the government over plans to dam the river'. His impressive personality along with his goal to save the river, made Mareb a party to the cause and they finally fell in love and married. However, her later disillusionment with this marriage is the result of the failure of that ideal as the river was finally locked (here we wonder whether it is the 'Tista' as Mareb and Dayud were from the region called the 'chicken neck'). So, Mareb returned to her former city which held the promise to deliver her and at least give her the 'different life' that she had always wanted.

Conclusion

The volatile social conditions of the twenty first century world, consists of unfamiliar and new complexities which give rise to arguments both for and against globalization. Does migration to the cities really allow these women to defy patriarchy and overcome their marginalized status, or do they face newer forms of oppression there? As is evident, migration also brings about questions of identity and citizenship of North East women.

Both Adna and Mareb are disillusioned in love. The men they love are only interested in having a secret affair with them. Neither Adna's friend nor Mareb's Rohit ever think about taking their relationship to the next level. This was also perhaps clearly evident to Mareb as a young college girl and she does not hesitate to ditch Rohit for Dayud. Racism underlines the North East migrant experience of cities like Delhi and it is worse for women as they are often labeled as promiscuous by the mainstream population. Men often consider them easily available. It has been found that average mainstream Indian men discriminate between mainstream Indian women and North East migrant women. Having observed her boyfriend's contempt for Mareb's adulterous relationship, Adna mentioned the possibility of his wife doing the same behind his back but his strong objection to such an idea clearly reveals his

²¹ Ibid., 35,36.

prejudices against North East women. The very fact that women migrants carried stones and small tools for self defense reflects the vulnerability of these women in the city. Beneath the cover of tolerance, there lurks intolerance in the same urban space as the periphery is victimized and abused for their 'otherness' – 'Hey you! *Jao! JAO!* Go back to your own . . . *DESH!*'²² and 'It was one of those skirmishes that happen in the city all the time' (Dai). Duncan Mcduie-ra in his study, *Northeast Migrants in Delhi: Race, Refuge and Retail*, underlines the grave reality of northeast migrant experience in the city that is significantly different from discrimination faced by other migrant communities.²³

Physical features denoting Tai, Tibeto-Burman, and Mon-Khmer lineage mark Northeasterners as separate from the Indian mainstream, even when accounting for the diversity of the mainstream. In fact, these features routinely lead to questioning of nationality and citizenship. (Mcduie-ra 2012).

In this context, T. B. Subba in his article 'Race, Identity and Nationality: Relocating Nepali Nationalism in India' opines, "Indeed, national identity of a person is assumed on the basis of his/her face or other points of physical/racial manifestation... the concept of national identity in India, as perhaps in most other countries of the world is essentially racist".²⁴ The citizenship of North East migrants, are often doubted and their nationality is often mistaken as Nepalese, Chinese, Japanese, etc. However, indomitable spirit of the hill tribes, help them survive under impossible circumstances. In giving expression to this spirit, Dai remains unbeaten as she asserts that just when the Centre was taking notice of the periphery after the agitation by All Assam Student's Union, and everyone in the city was saying "Oh, the North-East is a different country altogether"²⁵, there was an exodus from the periphery to the Centre as if to force upon the mainstream the truth of their existence and they crowded the city from everywhere to enjoy the opportunities that the city offered to everyone. Despite all odds, the tremendous fighting spirits of these women let them hit back and survive – 'Scratch us. Bite us. Let us feel pain. Suffer loss. Fall ill. See how we come back!²⁶' in the country's 'transition to proper urban modernity²⁷' in the post-independence era, the women from the periphery are unhesitant in claiming their share. They are all fiercely independent and wise women who accept life and its uncertainties with positive attitude. Adna's final decision to return to the city and take up her former business but of course with the caution this time - 'no lovers and strangers'²⁸ holds the promise that Adna had finally grown to her new role by shaping her own "decisions on the forms of life that she can and must follow".

²² Ibid., 52.

²³ Esther Daimari, "Images of Women in Mamang Dai's Fiction," *New Academia*, II, no. IV (Oct, 2013).

²⁴ Tanka B. Subba ed. *Race, Identity and Nationality: Relocating Nepali Nationalism in India*, (New Delhi: Sage, Millennial Asia, 2018).

²⁵ Dai, *Stupid Cupid*.

²⁶ Ibid., 149.

²⁷ Partha, Are Indian cities becoming bourgeois at last?

²⁸ Dai, *Stupid Cupid*.

