
**From Hills to High-Rises: Contrasting Psychogeographies in Mamang Dai's
*Stupid Cupid***

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Abstract

This paper explores the influence of physical spaces on the human mind through the lens of psychogeography, a concept that interweaves psychology, geography, and literature. It focuses on the contemporary Indian writer Mamang Dai's novel *Stupid Cupid* (2009), examining how the novel portrays the protagonist's movement from the hills of Arunachal Pradesh to the urban environment of Delhi. The narrative delves into the protagonist's psychological experiences, her sense of nostalgia, and the challenges she and her female friends face while adapting to the complexities of city life. The paper investigates how the characters navigate the emotional and spatial dissonance between their rural upbringing and the demands of an urban setting, using psychogeography as a framework to analyse their journeys through landscapes and mental spaces shaped by the hills and the city.

Keywords: Psychogeography, nostalgia, places, environment.

Introduction

The term 'psychogeography' originates back to the disciples of classical psychogeography, such as J. Walter Fewkes in 1905. Psychogeography was a term coined by Guy Debord in 1955. He defined psychogeography as "the study of the precise laws and specific effects of the geographical environment, consciously organized or not, on the emotions and behavior of individuals." (Debord, 1955). Guy Debord states: "Psychogeography could set for itself the study of the precise laws and specific effects of the geographical environment, whether consciously organized or not, on the emotions and behavior of individuals" (2006 24)

Ian McKay is a senior lecturer at Southampton University. He edited the Journal of Psychogeography and Urban Research. In one interview, he discussed bad and good examples based on the psychogeography theory. Coverley asserts that psychogeography is "at the point at which psychology and geography collide as a means of exploring the behavioral impact of a space" (2010 10). Tina Richardson claims that "psychogeography is

about crossing established boundaries, whether metaphorically or physically, locally or globally” (2015 2).

Coverley confirms: “Just as the act of writing expresses a journey through the terrain of the imagination, so too does the act of reading itself mirror the journey, as the reader is conducted on a journey with the author as a guide” (2012 42)

Mamang Dai, a journalist and former civil servant from Arunachal Pradesh, is known for her extensive work on the region's culture, tradition, and history. Her novel *Stupid Cupid* (2009), published in 2009, is the subject of a notable study. The story focuses on women from around the Eastern Himalayan Region, including Darjeeling, Siliguri, the entire Terai region, and Arunachal Pradesh. *Stupid Cupid* (2009) discusses the changing role of women in modern India, which is influenced by global metropolitan culture and contrasted with the overlooked rural culture. These women face various oppressions based on their race, ethnicity, and gender, both in urban and rural settings. Despite coming from different places, such as Darjeeling, Siliguri, Dimapur, Guwahati, and Itanagar, their shared struggles unite them (Barman 25). Following the country's liberalization, there has been a significant increase in private foreign investment and growth in every sector. However, this growth has come at the expense of many important and diverse ecosystems (Barman 33).

Discussion

The northeast Indian writer shared the beauty and grandeur of its landscape onto its literary canvas with a good number of fiction and non-fiction. Mamang Dai is the author of two non-fiction books, four poetical works, and five fiction works. It has transcended all geographical boundaries in portraying women from various parts of the Eastern Himalayan Region, spanning from Darjeeling and Siliguri and covering the entire Terai Region, all the way up to Arunachal Pradesh (Barman 25). Dai mentioned in her interview with Jaydeep Sarangi that "Rain and rivers like a curtain as if it's a holiday and I can revel in solitude ." (3)

Mamang Dai's second novel, *Stupid Cupid* (2009), blends the two cultures. The culture of Delhi and Northeast. The novel is more than what the title suggests. It is written very beautifully, Dai represents her culture very beautifully. Adna never wanted to forget her roots and is very proud of her culture. Adna, the narrator of the story, set up a love agency. A place where lovers, friends, men, and women spend time without hesitation. She was basically from Arunachal Pradesh. She has grown up looking at hills and mountains. She decided to start a business out of town; she migrated to Delhi from Arunachal Pradesh. She owned the property of her late aunt. With the help of her friend, she built the guest house and named it Four Season. Characters from this novel are coming from another state. Adna's friend Amine 'was from up north Jammu,' and they were friends from school in the 'hill town of Shillong.' (3)

The first employee of her guest house is Yoyo, the distant cousin of Adna. He is coming with Jia. Jia is a young independent girl who wrote an article for a local daily in the hills. The description of the arrival of Jia makes Adna remember her birthplace.

My cousin arrived with a sack of rice and an assortment of bundles and plastic packets full of homemade preparations. She was named after a river, but she gave the impression of a rock jutting out of the water as she bore down on me, lugging her bags.... She was short and square and dressed in the most improbable clothes, a bright sarong that flapped audibly and appeared to be tangled against her sandals at the heels. In our hometown, she would have been another typical, stolid, intractable tribal woman living in some unknown village had it not been for the fact that Jia was a reporter who wrote articles that were anti-everything. (26) The above lines from the text show that the people of the Northeast are very different from the cosmopolitan city of Delhi's people. When she reached the city, the first words she uttered were, "What a lot of people! I have never seen so many people in my life!" (27) Life in the city is completely different from life in the Northeast. The northeastern migrants are seen as different and as viewed as 'others'. For instance, from this text, when Jia hires the cab for themselves and the rude women, she bursts out very racist remarks: "Hey you! Jao! Jao! Go back to your own...Desh!" (52)

Adna was traveling from Itanagar, a small town in the Himalayan foothills in the far Northeast of the country. Itanagar is known for its lush greenery, and it is surrounded by mountains and abundant rainfall. The sweltering heat of her first summer in Delhi after the coolness of the hills had nearly overwhelmed her. (6)

My arrival in the city had been at the height of summer. A dust storm was blowing, and the plane circled many times before it was able to land.... The heat hit us in the face like fire from a blast furnace. (6)

From the bustling streets of Delhi, the northeastern region unfolded like a captivating and intricate map, where majestic mountains rose dramatically against the skyline, and shimmering rivers meandered gracefully through valleys. It seemed as though this enchanting landscape belonged to another world entirely, with its lush greenery and vibrant culture inviting exploration and adventure at every turn. The peaks, towering and proud, stood as silent sentinels over the rich tapestry of life below, creating a striking contrast to the urban sprawl of the capital.

The city was bustling with a vibrant mix of people from the northeastern states of India. Among them were individuals hailing from the lush hills of Mizoram, the scenic landscapes of Meghalaya, the rich cultural heritage of Nagaland, the serene beauty of Arunachal Pradesh, the diverse communities of Assam, the spirited residents of Manipur, and the tranquil charm of Sikkim. Each group brought with them its unique traditions, colors, and flavors, contributing to the city's dynamic tapestry of life.

The narrator reflects on the contrasting sounds of the city and the hills, emphasizing how these auditory experiences evoke a deep emotional connection to their homeland. The barking of dogs at night, occasionally overpowering the city's constant traffic noise, serves as a poignant reminder of home. This moment highlights the tension between the urban and rural environments, as the sounds of the dogs seem to resist being drowned out by the

overwhelming noise of the city. The narrator interprets this as a symbolic connection to the dim, rain-soaked hills of their birthplace, realizing that their heart remain tied to the familiar and intimate spaces of their homeland despite their physical presence in the city. This realization underscores the lasting emotional and sensory impact of one's origins, even amidst the dissonance of a new and alien environment.

Adna describes the shift in her relationship with food and cooking as she adjusts to urban life. She mentions that meals are often consumed casually, standing up and selecting only specific portions rather than sitting down for a traditional, elaborate meal. This change signifies a departure from the practices of her rural upbringing, where food preparation was deeply rooted in cultural rituals and sensory experiences. She notes the absence of heavy cooking tasks, such as winnowing rice, a process that connects her to the agricultural rhythms of her homeland and the familiar smells of fermented fish or soybeans, which are staples in her traditional cuisine. Adna's reflection highlights how the urban lifestyle strips away these culturally significant aspects of her identity, underscoring the disconnection she feels from her roots while adapting to a more hurried and impersonal way of living in the city.

Mamang Dai highlights the cultural practices, rituals, and beliefs of the Northeast, providing an intricate portrayal of communal life in the region. The narrative describes how rituals play a significant role in the social and spiritual fabric of the community. For instance, during important ceremonies or crises, a renowned shaman is often summoned from a neighboring village to lead these rituals, signifying the community's reliance on traditional knowledge and spiritual intermediaries.

Mareb, one of the characters, reflects on the nature of small-town life, noting its lack of privacy and the interconnectedness of its residents. She observes, "It is a small town, and everyone knows each other. There's no privacy. We were public property." (58). This statement captures the paradox of close-knit communities where shared lives foster support and belonging yet simultaneously impose constraints on individual autonomy. Dai uses Mareb's reflection to emphasize the collective nature of life in the Northeast, where personal space is often overshadowed by communal relationships and the ever-watchful eyes of neighbors. This dynamic contrasts sharply with the anonymity and detachment found in urban environments, further highlighting the psychological and social tensions the characters experience as they transition between these worlds.

Mareb and Dayud were from the hill region around the narrow corridor called the 'chicken neck,' which links the Northeastern states to the rest of the country. She gazed at the serene, unchanging landscape, observing how the mountains seemed to rise sharply and directly in front of her, creating the illusion of proximity and tangibility. The rugged peaks, with their towering presence, appeared so near that it felt as though she could touch them simply by reaching out her hand. This moment captures her deep connection to the environment, where the vastness and immensity of the natural world evoke both a sense of awe and a comforting familiarity. The scene underscores the intimate relationship between the

individual and the surrounding geography, highlighting how the physical landscape becomes a reflection of her emotional state and a tether to her sense of place and belonging.

The speaker reflects on the enduring presence of the mountains, remarking on their omnipresence and the awe they inspire in people who admire their grandeur and beauty. "Yes, the mountains are always there" (102), he acknowledges, emphasizing their timelessness and their role as a constant in the landscape. He notes that people often use mountains as metaphors for strength, stability, and resilience, describing them as "strong as a mountain, high, unmovable as a mountain." (102) However, his perception diverges from this idealized image.

Instead, he views the mountains as flawed and weathered, describing them as "foolish mountains, so streaked and scarred with rain and wind." (102). This characterization reveals a deeper, more nuanced understanding of the mountains, not as perfect symbols of permanence but as entities shaped and worn by the passage of time and the forces of nature. The imagery of streaks and scars conveys both the beauty and vulnerability of the mountains, reflecting the speaker's awareness of impermanence and the complex relationship between natural landscapes and human emotions. This perspective challenges traditional notions of strength, suggesting that even the most seemingly unchanging and formidable elements of the natural world are subject to transformation and fragility. Adna said, "I was thinking about a house. An old house in the hills built with hope. There is no design, only the functional lines in solid walls and beams." (139)

At the end of the novel, the tragic death of Amine, a close friend of Adna, serves as a turning point, prompting the group to leave the city and return to their homeland in the Northeast. The journey back unfolds primarily on a train, symbolizing their physical and emotional transition from the urban complexities of Delhi to the familiarity of their roots. Along the way, the narrative captures the sensory and cultural experiences of their passage through various regions, each offering glimpses into the diverse yet interconnected lives of India.

In Allahabad, Jia purchases a basket of guavas, thoughtfully declaring, "We'll take these back as presents" (151), emphasizing the cultural practice of carrying tokens from one's travels. As they move through Patna, the group enjoys curried eggs dyed red with masala, highlighting the regional flavors that punctuate their journey. At Mughal Sarai, the presence of a Tibetan couple on the train introduces a moment of reflection on the shared yet distinct identities within the broader tapestry of migration and displacement. Upon reaching Guwahati, the transition becomes palpable as Adna notices a language she recognizes. She observes, "I heard a familiar language being spoken as families struggled out of the train, and those who had come to receive them responded with happy cries" (152). This moment signifies a return not just to a geographical location but to a cultural and emotional space where belonging and connection are restored. The joyful chaos at the station, marked by reunions and familiar voices, contrasts sharply with the alienation they experienced in the

city, underscoring the comforting pull of home and community.

Life in the hills followed a tranquil and unhurried rhythm, marked by a sense of serenity that seemed almost cyclical. Sleep came easily in the quiet embrace of the natural surroundings, unbroken by the clamor of urban life. The rain, a constant presence, blanketed everything, muting sounds and wrapping the landscape in a veil of calm. Its persistence transformed the tracks left in the garden into small pools of water, erasing human activity and reinforcing the dominance of nature over space.

When the rain ceased, and the sun returned, the water in these pools began to evaporate, leaving behind no trace of disturbance. In their place, fresh tufts of grass emerged, a vivid symbol of renewal and resilience. This interplay between rain and sunshine, erosion and growth, reflected the harmonious balance of life in the hills. The landscape was not just a backdrop but a living entity, reshaping itself in quiet, unassuming ways, mirroring the peaceful yet ever-changing existence of those who lived within it. This passage captures the essence of a life deeply intertwined with the rhythms of nature, where time seems to flow as seamlessly as the cycles of weather and growth.

Conclusion

Mamang Dai's *Stupid Cupid* provides a profound exploration of the intersections between geography, psychology, and culture through its portrayal of characters navigating the complexities of urban and rural life. The novel illustrates how physical spaces influence emotional and social experiences, particularly in the context of migration and displacement. By contrasting the tranquil, deeply rooted life in the hills with the chaotic, alienating urban existence in Delhi, Dai highlights the tensions and transformations experienced by her characters. Using the framework of psychogeography, this paper has examined how the novel reflects on themes of nostalgia, belonging, and the impact of place on identity. The protagonist's journey and the shared struggles of the women in the story emphasize the challenges of adapting to modernity while remaining tethered to cultural and emotional roots. Dai's nuanced depiction of the Northeastern region's landscapes and traditions offers valuable insights into the cultural richness of the area while addressing broader issues of marginalization and the effects of urbanization on traditional ways of life. Ultimately, *Stupid Cupid* serves as a powerful narrative that captures the dissonance between different spaces and the enduring connection to one's homeland, making it a significant work for understanding the intricate dynamics between place, identity, and emotion.

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