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Storied Lands and Silenced Voices: Reading Mamang Dai's *The Black Hill* through the lens of *Terristory*

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Abstract

Indigenous epistemologies, shaped by deep, reciprocal relationships with the land, have historically been marginalised under colonial regimes, a pattern that persists in many post-colonial contexts. In Dibang Valley, Arunachal Pradesh, India, the exclusion of the local Idu Mishmi community from decisions related to wildlife conservation exemplifies the ongoing erasure of Indigenous perspectives and territorial claims by dominant state and scientific discourses, demanding immediate critical interrogation. Situated within this critical imperative, the paper examines Mamang Dai's *The Black Hill* (2014), a novel set in the nineteenth century in the region now known as Arunachal Pradesh, home to several Indigenous communities, including the Idu Mishmis of the Dibang Valley, through the lens of *territory*, a concept rooted in Indigenous relational ontology that understands land and narrative as inherently interconnected. It argues that territory, disrupted by colonial and post-colonial forces, finds powerful expression in Dai's novel through its privileging of oral traditions, animistic worldviews, and the dissolution of boundaries between myth and history. These narrative strategies resist hegemonic epistemologies, reaffirm Indigenous sovereignty, and articulate alternative ecological ethics. In doing so, the novel emerges as a vital intervention in ongoing struggles over land, identity, and knowledge.

Keywords: *Land, Oral traditions, Territory, Epistemic violence, The Black Hill*

1. Introduction

When conservation scientist, Sahil Nijhawan went to the Dibang Valley in March of 2012 to assess the presence of tigers beyond the boundaries of the formally designated Protected Areas of Northeast India, he was advised by an elder[i] hailing from the Idu Mishmi community inhabiting the region, to "go high up in the mountains" if he wanted to find "a lot of tigers." The elder said, "In our culture, tigers live on tall mountains." However, Nijhawan's understanding of tiger ecology, at that point of time, grounded in scientific education and backed by "hard-data," suggested that "a lot of tigers didn't and couldn't 'live on high mountains'", because "tigers were a conservation dependent species that (only) survived when governments and NGOs…put in active measures to protect them." Since there existed no such facilities to protect

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tigers in the high mountains, Nijhawan recalls receiving the Idu elder's suggestion with a courteous nod, "as you do when dismissing someone, politely." He concluded that "the 'tigers' that the Idu elder was talking about were either fictional or unfortunate remnants of a past population." However, his initial assumptions would be challenged by subsequent studies, prompted by the discovery of tiger tracks in "the tall mountains" just days later, precisely as the Idu elder had claimed. This not only validated the elder's ecological knowledge but also revealed the limitations of Nijhawan's "scientifically-backed" assumptions (Nijhawan).

Nijhawan's initial scepticism towards the Idu perspective on the presence of the tiger in the "tall mountains" exemplifies a broader pattern of systemic devaluation of Indigenous voices and epistemologies by dominant state and science discourses. This tendency to dismiss Indigenous perspectives is most apparent in the conservation strategies employed by both state and non-state actors in Dibang Valley. Much like Nijhawan's initial disbelief in the Idu elder's cultural assertion, these conservation interventions have been widely criticised for alienating the voices of the Idu Mishmi community in decisions that directly affect their lands. The exclusion of Idu Mishmi voice from conservation policymaking is a striking example of this marginalisation. Ebbo Mili, an advocate from the Idu Mishmi community, highlights the arbitrary and illegal nature of the declaration of Dibang Wildlife Sanctuary's (DWLS) in the past. Pointing out that the decision violated provisions of the Wildlife Protection Act and the Forest Rights Act, which require formal consultations with local communities, Mili explains:

"As Idu Mishmis are forest dwellers, FRA (Forest Rights Act) was applicable here and a meeting should have been arranged chaired by the Gram Panchayat. However, the DC (District Controller) wrote a letter saying there were no claims or objections by the villagers despite them being given 8 month's time. They arbitrarily declared it as Wildlife Sanctuary and didn't entertain the claims and objection" (Guha).

Such dismissal of Indigenous perspectives and epistemologies stems from colonial biases that privilege written traditions over oral ones, reinforcing hierarchies that have historically regarded orality as inferior within the written/oral binary. Colonialist discourses framed the written word as the primary site of epistemic authority, endowing it with the power of "presence," civilisational prestige, and legitimate, institutional knowledge. Valorised for its perceived permanence, fixity, and capacity for exact reproduction, the written word was symbolically aligned with the apparatus of colonial governance and cultural superiority. In contrast, the spoken word, within colonial discourse, was seen with suspicion owing to its inherent adaptability and contextual fluidity.

Reflecting on the entanglement of writing with colonial regimes of power and epistemological superiority, and the simultaneous ascription of a sense of lack to orality in colonialist discourse, Tilottoma Misra argues:

"the colonial ethnographer often represented the colonised as being bedazzled by the superior technological advancement of the colonisers, and the written records were considered to be the most potent emblems of power" (Misra 26).

While the written word in the colonial discourse, thus, represented more than just a means of documentation and became a performative marker of colonial authority, orality, in the colonialist discourse, Temsula Ao notes, was "identified with the illiterate and even the uncivilised" (Ao 104).

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The dominant state and science discourses in post-colonial India, similarly shaped by colonial hegemonic notions of "modernity" and "progress," that valorise the written word as a superior form of technology, continue to perpetuate the colonial dismissal of orally transmitted Indigenous knowledge as irrational and deficient. Consequently, rich and complex oral epistemologies are relegated to the realm of superstition, obscuring their intellectual depth and cultural legitimacy.

The post-colonial perpetuation of colonial epistemic hierarchies, as evidenced in the preceding discussion on Nijhawan's experience with the Idu Mishmis of Arunachal Pradesh and the alienation of the Idu voice from conservation decisions, underpins the tension between Indigenous and Institutional understandings of the tiger in Dibang Valley. Elaborated by Ambika Aiyadurai in her article, "Tigers are Our Brothers': Understanding Human-Nature Relations in the Mishmi Hills, Northeast India," the Idu Mishmi's relational[ii] and culturally embedded knowledge of the tiger, whereby the tiger is perceived to be a brother to the Idu Mishmi, stands in stark contrast to state and science constructions of the tiger as a national asset and an endangered species.

This epistemological conflict lies at the core of the Idu-Mishmi resistance to the National Tiger Conservation Authority's (NTCA) proposal to convert the Dibang Wildlife Sanctuary into a designated tiger reserve. Concerned about potential displacement and the severance of ties with their ancestral land, an outcome which would critically disrupt their livelihood and relational ontology, the Idu Mishmis have actively challenged the proposed conversion of the Dibang Wildlife Sanctuary (DWLS) to a tiger reserve. Central to their resistance is the invocation of the story of Idu-tiger brotherhood, which, tracing the origin of tigers and Idu-Mishmis to a common ancestral mother, underpins an ethical worldview in which the tiger is regarded not merely as wildlife, but as kin, rendering the act of killing a tiger a grave moral transgression, akin to homicide. This deeply rooted ethical relationship is poignantly articulated by Angeche, a 45-year-old Idu Mishmi, in a conversation with Aiyadurai:

"Why a tiger reserve here? We don't hunt tigers, they are our brothers! Tigers and humans were born to the same mother. We kill tigers only as a last option, when they become a human threat or when they are killed in traps accidentally. We are protecting them anyway" (308).

As both Nijhawan and Aiyadurai demonstrate in their respective works, the dominant conservationist narrative, which frames the reconstitution of the DWLS as a tiger reserve as essential for the protection of the species, is challenged by the reality on the ground. Dibang Valley already functions, in practice, as a culturally protected habitat for tigers:

"Dibang Valley indeed acted like a well-guarded tiger reserve, except that there were no forest guards, systematic patrols, government funding, Tiger Conservation Plans, eco-resorts or tiger tourists. The tiger, its prey and its habitat were protected in Dibang Valley by Idu culture, which in turn has been safeguarded by Arunachal's Inner Line Permit, a legal instrument that prohibits the influx of non-locals" (Nijhawan).

These critical studies, while validating the Idu Mishmi perspective on their tiger sibling, reveal the profound relationship between Indigenous expressions, historically rooted in orality and infused with Indigenous knowledge, and the land[iii] they emerge from. This connection between land and Indigenous expressions constitutes the cultural and ontological foundation for many Indigenous communities across the world. In the context of the Idu Mishmi community, it is this

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relational bond with the land and its constituent members that shapes their knowledge of the presence and movement of their tiger kin.

This intrinsic unity of land and narratives is conceptualised by Warren Cariou through the neologism *terristory,* [iv] a portmanteau of "territory" and "story." Challenging the representational model of signification dominant in Western critical traditions, which frames stories and narratives as mere mimetic depictions of land, and informed by works of Indigenous thinkers such as Jeannette Armstrong, the lens of *terristory* reorients this relationship. Rather than viewing land as the passive object of narrative, Armstrong (1997), in "Land Speaking," emphasises that land itself communicates through stories, and that indigenous narratives can emerge from the land. Building upon this notion, *terristory* centres the interrelation between land and narrative, treating them not as separate entities but as an interwoven force, as "aspects of the same thing or not thing, but action, relation, energy, location" (Cariou 8).

Within the framework of *terristory*, thus, Indigenous land and narrative form a dynamic, living, and nurturing relational medium that Cariou describes as "the ground of culture" in which Indigenous communities not only survive but flourish. This medium also includes entities or beings from whom Indigenous peoples learn their responsibilities, reinforcing an ethics of care, accountability, and reciprocity. Terristory, thus, signifies not a single bond but a plural and ongoing network of relations rooted in the connection between land and narratives constituting the very mode through which Indigenous peoples are rooted in both community and land.

Further, suggesting that "the distinction between story (oral tradition) and land is itself part of the colonial process of commodification and separation that has disrupted so much of Indigenous culture and philosophy," (Cariou 2), he foregrounds the practice of terristory as a means of reasserting the relationality between land and Indigenous expression, offering a decolonial framework against the separation caused by colonial contact between Indigenous expressions and land-based identity. Viewed through the lens of *terristory*, the Idu Mishmi claims of human-tiger brotherhood in the Dibang Valley, in response to dominant narratives that risk severing their connection with the land, can be understood as an affirmation of the enduring Idu Mishmi relationship with a fellow member of the land, the tiger, and by implication, reinforcing their claims to their land. Terristory, thus articulated, through the story of Idu-tiger brotherhood, operates as a mode of asserting territorial and cultural sovereignty, grounded in a relational epistemology that has historically structured Idu lifeworlds. By foregrounding this interspecies kinship, *terristory* functions as a counter-discursive framework that challenges both the hierarchical logics of colonial epistemologies and the reductive conservation paradigms of the post-colonial state, which often silence Indigenous voices and disrupt the relational ethics at the heart of such knowledge systems.

In light of the ongoing marginalisation of Indigenous voices within the post-colonial Indian nation state, as evidenced in the preceding discussion, it is imperative to interrogate the dominant discourses that sustain and perpetuate these exclusions. This paper, situating itself within this critical imperative, offers a close reading of Mamang Dai's *The Black Hill* (2014) through the lens of *terristory*. It pays particular attention to the ways the novel, set in the mid-nineteenth century in the region now known as Arunachal Pradesh in Northeast India, the same state in which the Idu Mishmi conservation conflict discussed above unfolds, engages with the literary practice of what Temsula Ao terms "writing orality," by articulating specifically Abor and Mishmi relational epistemologies embedded in land and narrative. In doing so, it delineates how the novel resists dominant discourses that delegitimise Indigenous knowledge systems as

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illegitimate, a form of epistemic violence which has tangible, material consequences, as illustrated by the tensions between state-led scientific conservation agendas and Indigenous Idu perspectives in the Dibang Valley.

2. *The Black Hill* through the lens of *Terristory*:

In an early section of the novel, titled "Kajinsha and Gimur," set in 1850, during the initial period of British incursions in to the Abor territory, a village elder responds to the British incineration of an Abor settlement with a powerful statement: "The British may conquer the world but they will never take our land. The words of the milguns[v] are like a fleabite" (Dai 25).

While acknowledging the global reach of British imperial conquest, the elder's statement, implying the lack of potency of the coloniser's words to claim Abor land, articulates a striking epistemological opposition to colonial authority. This resistance is rooted in the worldview that is cardinal to Indigenous traditions, whereby language, particularly oral language, is deeply intertwined with the land. What renders the coloniser's "words" ineffective, no more consequential than a "fleabite," in terms of making claims to Abor land, is their grounding in a predominantly chirographic (writing-based) culture, one that remains disconnected from the land and the living, relational modes of knowing which are sustained through orality.

Unlike the words of the Abor, which are grounded in centuries of cohabitation with the land, and derive strength from that embeddedness, the colonisers' words—whether spoken or written- are dis-embedded from such relations. Produced within a culture where writing has eclipsed orality, these words are alien, abstract, and unmoored from place, and thus incapable of establishing a legitimate claim to land. The statement, therefore, does more than merely dismiss the authority of the British colonial presence through a rejection of the power of their chirographically rooted discourse; it simultaneously affirms the Abor people's place-based claim to their land by foregrounding their enduring connection to the land through their oral tradition.

This positioning of orality as a form of sovereignty, implying that the power to claim and inhabit land lies not in imperial documents or declarations (symbolised by "the words of the milguns" here), but in the sustained relationality of Indigenous narrative practices, constitutes an instance when terristory is asserted in defiance of colonial advances into Abor land. This moment encapsulates the novel's broader exploration of the deep interconnection between land and orality within Indigenous communities as a mode of resistance to colonial epistemic violence.

2.1 Disruptions and Reassertions of terrsitory in *The Black Hill*

While the Abor elder's statement affirms terristory, it simultaneously reveals a need for such an affirmation, suggesting conditions of disruption in the relational order that necessitated its reassertion in the first place. As Cariou observes, while terristory constitutes the cultural ground upon which Indigenous entities live and relate, the imperative to assert the relationality between Indigenous expressions and their land arises primarily in moments when that continuity is disrupted by external forces:

"There is no need for the stories (narratives) to make a claim to the land when their connection to the land is not contested by an outside agent-when terristory exists in its full strength and unity. The need for a land claim comes at the moment when terristory has been disrupted, and the land claim can be understood as an attempt to re-assert the primacy of terristory" (5).

One way in which disruption of terristory unfolds in the novel is through internalisation of the colonial gaze,[vi] resulting from colonial epistemic violence, which is symbolically encoded

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through the recurrent motif of the written/oral binary in the novel. One of the prominent characters in the novel, Gimur, situated within a predominantly oral epistemological framework of the Abor community, following her encounter with the chirographic culture for the first time through a spelling book scripted by the colonisers, is seen mimicking the act of writing. This moment marks the beginning of her internalisation of the colonial gaze, which surfaces in a later exchange with her friend Lendem. Feeling cornered on being confronted by Lendem's uncomfortable questions about her relationship with a man from another tribe, she reflects to herself, "Now he's trying to lecture me…just because he can speak Assamese and read a few words, he thinks he knows everything" (Dai 32). In this moment, Lendem's ability to read and his command over the script-based Assamese language signify for Gimur, a form of power, while simultaneously ascribing a sense of lack to her non-chirographic self, even as she resists that authority.

This internalisation of the colonial gaze leads to the gradual erosion of epistemic worth, triggering a rupture in Gimur's relational connection to the land. Caught between oral Indigenous knowledge systems and the written, chirographic order of the colonisers, she struggles to locate herself in terristory. This crisis becomes evident when Gimur is seen reflecting on the significance of land after her bond with it is fractured in the wake of her encounter with chirographic culture:

"What is land? Why is it so precious? Even her mother had agreed that land was everything, throwing up her hands at her daughter's insistent questions.' It is where you were born!' She had said. And how important was that?" (Dai 70).

While Gimur's internalisation of the colonial gaze following colonial epistemic violence precipitates a rupture in her relationship with land, reflecting a disruption in terristory, the reverse holds true too. When the land is subjected to colonial violence, its connection with speech is severed too, thereby signalling a disruption of terristory from the other end.

In a deeply poignant moment in the novel, that marks a rupture in terristory, and captures the significance of the title of the novel, "The Black Hill," Gimur lapses into a state of permanent silence after having endured a series of traumatic experiences following the violent attack by the colonisers on the hill she and her husband, Kajinsha lived on, rendering it "black," "strewn with ash and blood." (Dai 267) These cumulative experiences, following the attack on their land, leave her unable to form coherent, meaningful sentences. Rendered incapable of doing anything more than "uttering sounds like unintelligible prayers" (Dai 282), her ability to engage with language in the way she once could, that is, through speech, collapses. In other words, the physical violence inflicted on the land that once held Kajinsha and Gimur's home, followed by further acts of colonial aggression, including Kajinsha's death at the hands of the colonisers, marks a moment that takes away Gimur's ability to speak, to practice orality, reflecting an interruption in terristory. This moment, once again, reasserts the profound connection between Indigenous expressions and the land the community lives with.

The hierarchical written/oral binary, as structured by colonial discourse through which epistemic violence is encoded in the novel, however, provokes its own undoing as the novel performs a symbolic subversion of the binary by overturning the motif to centre orality and reclaim its epistemic value. When Gimur, on being introduced to the chirographic culture through the spelling book, pretends to record words and events on it, in a moment that foregrounds the epistemic tension between orality and literacy, her mother reprimands her for

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"wasting time with these white, dead leaves!" as she sarcastically asks her, "What kind of magic are you expecting by doing this?" (Dai 33).

In a parallel gesture, when the French Jesuit priest, Father Krick, emblematic of a culture steeped in chirographic traditions, presents a letter of safe conduct issued by the Tibetan authorities to the Mishmi chief, Zumsha, he rejects the letter. Rather than serving its intended function as a legitimising instrument ensuring the priest's safe passage through Mishmi territory, the letter instead provokes sentiments of anger. Zumsha, located within an oral epistemological framework, threatens to "throw it (the letter) into the fire" (Dai 158).

While these acts of overturning seemingly appear to echo the traditional privileging of speech over writing in Western philosophy, a hierarchical binary construct that Derrida effectively deconstructs in *Of Grammatology*, they assume a distinctly counter-hegemonic character in the colonial context of the narrative of the novel. For Indigenous communities anchored in oral epistemologies and subjected to chirographically-informed colonial regimes of dominance, the privileging of speech operates not as a philosophical return to the traditional binary construct privileging the oral over the written, but as a counter-hegemonic intervention, a symbolic act of resistance against the self-serving colonial hierarchical structuring of the written/oral binary.

In this context, Zumsha's refusal to accept the letter, emblematic of the written word and its institutional weight, becomes a figurative act of resistance, enacted through speech, symbolising the reclamation of orality as an instrument of agency and dissent. In a similar gesture, when Gimur's mother urges her to "speak the words you mean" instead of imitating the act of inscription, she privileges vocal expression over the act of writing, thereby subverting the colonial logic that historically aligns meaning and authority with the written word.

In the face of colonial epistemic violence, affirmations of orality, central to Indigenous relational epistemology, function as assertions of terristory. However, terristory is most powerfully asserted when Indigenous connection to the land is foregrounded as a direct response to such violence. A pivotal moment in *The Black Hill* illustrates this when the Mishmi chief Kajinsha, following a conversation with Father Krick, reclaims epistemic authority by invoking his ability to read the land. In response to the Bible-holding priest's implied spiritual superiority, evident in Kajinsha's challenge, "Why you have come here to tell us of a God you say is more powerful than any other god", Kajinsha responds:

"The Tibetan Lamas have books and you read your book for knowledge of God. We read the land. The land is our book. Everything here on the hill, the grass and rocks and stones is saying something" (Dai 140).

For Kajinsha, land itself becomes scripture, a living repository of knowledge, and reading the land emerges as an Indigenous epistemic practice that resists colonial impositions, reasserting the vitality of terristory as a space of relational knowledge and resistance.

2.2 Narrating "Terristories" in *The Black Hill*

Terristory, in *The Black Hill,* also unfolds through the narration of a kind of stories that Carious suggests best exemplifies terristory, by linking themselves to the land in material ways. Although Cariou extends the applicability of *terristory* beyond oral forms to encompass all narrative types, its emphasis on the materiality of oral stories makes it particularly suited to engaging with Indigenous oral storytelling. Focusing specifically on oral narratives, his point of departure for conceptualising *terristory*, Carious argues that *terristory*, by demonstrating that oral

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stories are not detached from but inhabit the land, and have material presence, enables a critical rejection of the long-held assumption about the transient nature of oral stories. In underlining the materiality of oral stories, often disregarded by dominant discourses as relics of the pre-modern past, *terristory* provides a powerful critical framework for understanding the continued vitality of Indigenous storytelling in the contemporary world and for affirming Indigenous sovereignty, agency, and ethical relationality with land when that relationship is contested. As Carious posits:

"Rather than imagining oral stories as evanescent, incorporeal and constantly threatened with disappearance, perhaps this way of thinking would help us to foreground the substantiality of stories, their matter and their resilience. If stories live in the land and are not separate from it, then it is easier to see how they are as real and persistent as anything in the material world." (Cariou, 2020, p.2).

One such story is evoked by the sight of a rock in the section titled "Journey." On their way to Kajinsha's place, Gimur and Kajinsha come across a rock. Pointing towards it, Kajinsha recounts the story of a girl the rock has come to be associated with. The girl, claimed by the spirit of a bird in the tug of war between man and spirits, had to go and live with him only to return once to pay the bride price in the form of a mighty wind (to clear her parents' fields). Accompanied by a tiger in this journey, before leaving, the daughter promises to "spread her red garment on that rock, there" every day to let them know that she was alive and well. However, as Kajinsha recounts, "For four years the old couple looked at the rock and saw their daughter's bright cloth spread out on it. Then one day the rock was bare" (Dai 66).

The story serves as a mnemonic device as the sight of the rock triggers Kajinsha's recollection of the story embedded in the rock. Kajinsha, here, engages in a practice what Cariou articulates as "a mode of reading the land," whereby people "see these places and remember the stories, and often re-tell the stories as they are passing by" thereby linking them to the land in a profoundly material way (Dai, 2014, p. 3). The rock, marked by the absence of the red cloth, is imprinted with the story of the girl.

While the rock, imprinted with the girl's story, may function as a geographical marker aiding in the navigation of the landscape, it simultaneously serves as a site for the inscription of Mishmi Indigenous ontological credence characterised by its animistic faith and the reciprocal relationship with the land, specifically in this context, its more-than-human animal and bird inhabitants. The agency and personhood attributed to the bird spirit who marries the girl, and the notion of the tiger as a companion, delineate a cosmology in which the more-than-human entities are conceived as agential beings with consciousness. This ontological stance is reaffirmed by Kajinsha later, when he attributes speaking agency to various land-members including the hill, grass, rocks and stones as he asserts how "all of them are telling something to us which we need to listen to" (Dai 140).

Aiyadurai sheds light on the ways the ethical underpinnings of the Mishmi relationship to their land, particularly the animals, are shaped by their animistic ontological credence and the attendant practice of attributing personhood to more-than-human members of the land. While the level of personhood ascribed to different animals might vary, the animist relational ontology, integral to the community's ways of life, nonetheless creates a worldview that perceives animals and more-than-human entities to have intentionality, consciousness, and moral agency. It is within this epistemological context that the practice of hunting, although undertaken for subsistence, trade, and protection of humans and their products, is never seen as a neutral act of

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resource extraction but as a morally charged encounter. The act of hunting is, therefore, always attended by a sense of moral responsibility that manifests itself in taboos and rituals observed before, during, or after the hunting activity. As Aiyadurai remarks, "There is a sense of moral responsibility attached to hunted animals, and taboos (aangi) observed during hunting and trapping make hunting (aambe) a serious activity" (Aiyadurai 309).

In the novel, thus, terristory is sustained through the material embodiment of the story by the rock, which continues to elicit the story in those who pass by, prompting them to become storytellers, much like Kajinsha does for Gimur, thereby ensuring the story's continued circulation through its oral rearticulations.

Within this framework, the figure of the tiger as a human companion, as portrayed in the story, also resonates with the story of the Idu-tiger brotherhood, as discussed earlier in the paper, reinforcing the Idu-Mishmi articulations of terristory as a counter-narrative to state and science-driven discourses on tiger conservation in the Dibang Valley.

In another resonant moment in the narrative, terristory, as the convergence of land and story as a living, relational matrix, is dramatised through the story of the river serpent, rooted in oral traditions, as the story shifts from mythical time[vii] into the historical time of the novel's plot. The episode unfolds during Kajinsha and Gimur's journey to his ancestral home, when they encounter a snake and Kajinsha kills the creature without much hesitation. This act of killing the snake, while on the surface, appears incidental, within the Indigenous epistemological cosmology the novel invokes, it marks a rupture with the more-than-human world governed by rules of respect, reciprocity, and ancestral memory. Shortly after this incident, Gimur, who is pregnant, is seen seated beside a river. The sight of the river becomes a sensory and mnemonic portal that transports her into the realm of remembered stories from her childhood, tales of a serpent spirit dwelling in the river, angered by the killing of her children, waiting in the depths to exact revenge.

Gimur's internal monologue, "There is always a serpent spirit lurking in deep water, waiting to pull someone in… The snake is angry because her children have been killed by men, and she wants revenge. Who is the unfortunate passerby she will claim?" (Dai 84), signals not only her embeddedness in the Abor cosmology, but also a foreboding sense of retribution. The narrative follows this moment with the traumatic loss of one of her twin children in childbirth, transforming the serpent's vengeance from a mythic motif into a lived, historical consequence. In doing so, the novel collapses the binary between mythical time and historical time, showing how the world of stories continues to inflect and shape the material world. Kajinsha's act of killing a snake reflects disregard for the cosmological knowledge and the moral and ontological order embedded in the story and becomes an act of transgression against the more-than-human realm, which results in the subsequent loss of one of his twins during childbirth. Portraying the serpent as a being with memory, grievance, and agency, this incident constitutes a moment of interspecies reckoning illuminating the relational consequences of failing to uphold the protocols of co-existence inscribed in the Indigenous epistemologies. This blending of temporalities—mythical and historical—not only affirms the enduring vitality of orality within Indigenous lifeworlds but also challenges colonial and post-colonial dominant temporal regimes that seek to relegate such narratives to a mythologised past. By allowing oral traditions to actively intervene in the novel's historical present, *The Black Hill* asserts the epistemological sovereignty of Indigenous storytelling against both colonial and post-colonial forms of epistemic violence. The serpent story becomes a vessel of terristory, a way of knowing, being, and relating,

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where narrative and land co-constitute one another. It is within this relational field that Kajinsha's loss gains its fullest meaning: as both a personal tragedy and a cultural allegory of what happens when the sacred balance between humans and the more-than-human world is disrupted.

3. Conclusion

Reading *The Black Hill* through the lens of *territory* demonstrates that while territory is grounded in Indigenous relational ontology that understands land and story as co-constitutive, it gains particular urgency in the face of colonial disruption, both epistemic and material. The novel illustrates how such disruptions, manifested in the internalisation of the colonial gaze, the privileging of chirographic authority, and the violent assault on inhabited land, fracture the intimate connection between Indigenous expressions, identity, and the land. Yet, these moments of rupture also become occasions for resistance and re-articulation. Through symbolic refusals of the written word and acts of oral and territorial reassertion, characters such as Kajinsha, Zumsha, and Gimur's mother reclaim orality as a site of Indigenous agency.

Territory also emerges, in the novel, through stories embedded in physical features of the landscape, such as the story of the girl evoked by the rock, or the story of the serpent spirit dwelling in the river. Through these "territories," Indigenous oral traditions are shown not as ephemeral myths of a distant past but as vital, material, and enduring forms of knowledge. These stories do not merely describe the land; they inhabit it, transforming geographical features into storied sites that guide, instruct, and bear witness to ethical relationships with the more-than-human world. Through these stories, the novel foregrounds an animistic ontology that attributes agency, consciousness, and memory to animals, spirits, and elements of the landscape, thereby affirming a worldview in which the land is not inert or passive but alive with relational significance.

This materiality of "territories" is further emphasised in the conflation of mythical and historical time, most notable in the juxtaposition of Kajinsha's killing of a snake followed by the death of one of his twins, and the story of the vengeful serpent spirit dwelling in the river, seeking retribution for the loss of her children. This merging of the historical and the mythical time transforms the story into a cultural allegory of what happens when the sacred balance between humans and the more-than-human world is disrupted, thereby affirming the continued presence and potency of the story within the historical narrative of the novel. In doing so, *The Black Hill* affirms the enduring vitality of orality within Indigenous lifeworlds, challenging colonial and post-colonial dominant temporal regimes that seek to relegate such narratives to a mythologised past.

The novel's assertion of the material and epistemic force of "territories" through its collapse of mythical and historical time acquires deeper significance when situated against the backdrop of the marginalisation of Idu Mishmi knowledge systems by dominant state and science discourse that tend to relegate the Idu Mishmi story of human-tiger kinship to the realm of myth and superstition. Recent findings that lend credence to the narrative of Idu-tiger brotherhood, coupled with Idu Mishmi concerns over losing access to their ancestral lands if the proposed tiger reserve is implemented, underscore the high stakes of epistemic silencing faced by the community. In this light, the novel's articulation of territory as a dynamic and resistant force gains renewed political urgency, speaking directly to the ongoing struggles over land, identity, and epistemic sovereignty in the region.

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Thus, the paper, by drawing parallels between epistemic violence of colonial discourses and the ongoing marginalisation of Indigenous voices in post-colonial India, particularly in the context of tensions between state and science conservation narratives and the Idu-Mishmi oral tradition that is underpinned by a relational ethic, underscores the urgency of sustaining *terristory* as a contemporary framework for reading and relating to land. Such a framework carries important implications for alternative modes of ecological thinking, rooted in ethics of respect and responsibility. Through this act of [viii]"writing orality," *The Black Hill* itself becomes an instance of "terristory," reasserting the relational ethic between human and more-than-human being.

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[i] Also, referred to in the *The Black Hill* by Dai, the term "ELDER," IN THE INDIGENOUS CONTEXT, carries far deeper significance than its conventional association with age. An "elder," in this context, is a respected member of the community, who, being deeply attuned to the land, assumes the role of the custodian of traditional knowledge, oral histories, and cosmological insight, and transmits the community's values and ethical frameworks across generations through storytelling, ceremonial practice, and embodied example. Thus, in the context discussed above, the advice offered to Nijhawan gains much more significance precisely because it is given by an Idu Mishmi elder, who, by his long-standing relationship with the land, and people, embodies the Indigenous relational responsibility.

[ii]In the Indigenous context, "relationality" refers to the foundational worldview that sees all life, human and more-than-human entities, as interconnected through relationships of responsibility, reciprocity, and respect. Instead of seeing individuals or knowledge as isolated or autonomous, relationality underlines how meaning, identity, and knowledge emerge from and are sustained by relationships with the land, community, ancestors, spirits, and more-than-human entities.

[iii]"Land," within the Indigenous relational framework, is not seen as an object or just a resource but as a living relation. Often seen as a relative or kin, land, in this context, is a part of a web of reciprocal relationships between humans and more-than-human beings, including animals, plants, ancestors, and spiritual beings.

[iv] Due to the layered meanings embedded in the term, this paper employs three distinct usages of TERRISTORY. When italicised, TERRISTORY denotes the conceptual framework developed by Cariou and employed to read *The Black Hill* in this paper; when used in plain text, terristory refers broadly to the relational connection between land and narrative within Indigenous ontologies; and when placed within quotation marks, "terristory" refers to specific stories from within the oral tradition of Indigenous communities (in this context, the Abor and Mishmi oral traditions) which best exemplify terristory.

[v] "Milgun" is a term employed in *The Black Hill* to refer to British colonisers.

[vi] "Colonial gaze" refers to the way colonisers perceived, constructed, and represented the colonised subjects and their cultures from a position of dominance, control, and assumed superiority.

[vii] "Mythical time" refers to the non-linear, mythic temporality often found in oral traditions, myths, and Indigenous storytelling, where events are not bound by historical chronology but exist in timeless, symbolic or cyclical realm.

[viii] "Writing orality," conceptualised by Temsula Ao, refers to the act of translating oral traditions, stories, and Indigenous worldviews into written literary forms, thereby preserving and revitalising them within literary and cultural discourse.