



Towards 'Ethnophytoliterature': Indigenous Plant Memory and the Phytohumanistic Imagination in Mamang Dai's River Poems

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Abstract: The growing convergence of Environmental Humanities, Plant Studies, and Indigenous literary criticism has significantly transformed contemporary ecological discourse by foregrounding the relationship between human communities and the more-than-human world. Despite these theoretical developments, relatively little attention has been devoted to the literary representation of culturally embedded plant knowledge within Indigenous traditions. While ecocriticism has examined environmental consciousness and Plant Studies has explored vegetal ontology, the specific role of plants as repositories of ethnocultural memory, ritual practice, ecological knowledge, and Indigenous identity remains insufficiently theorised. Addressing this conceptual gap, the present study proposes '**Ethnophytoliterature**' as a new interpretative framework within Phytohumanities. The term is introduced to designate a mode of literary inquiry that examines how plants function as culturally situated agents preserving and transmitting Indigenous ecological epistemologies through literary representation.

The paper undertakes a qualitative textual analysis of Mamang Dai's *River Poems* (Writers Workshop, 2004), employing close reading alongside insights from ecocriticism, Plant Studies, ethnobotany, Environmental Humanities, and Indigenous literary studies. Restricting the analysis to this collection enables a sustained examination of Dai's early poetic imagination and its intimate relationship with the ecological and cultural landscapes of Arunachal Pradesh. The study argues that vegetation in *River Poems* extends far beyond descriptive landscape or poetic ornamentation. Bamboo, forests, flowering plants, leaves, riverine vegetation, and other vegetal presences emerge as active participants in the construction of place, collective memory, ecological ethics, cultural continuity, and Indigenous systems of knowledge. Rather than functioning merely as symbols of nature, plants become epistemic and cultural agents through which the Adi worldview is imagined, preserved, and transmitted.

The article further demonstrates that existing critical approaches, although invaluable in illuminating Dai's environmental consciousness, generally subsume vegetal life within the broader category of "nature." Such readings overlook the culturally specific meanings attached to plants within Indigenous communities. By foregrounding these meanings, **Ethnophytoliterature** offers a more nuanced analytical vocabulary for understanding plant-centred literary traditions. The framework complements rather than replaces ecocriticism, ethnobotany, and Plant Studies by directing critical attention to the literary lives of plants as archives of ethnocultural memory and ecological knowledge.

Ultimately, the paper argues that *River Poems* should be read not only as an ecological text but also as a literary archive of Indigenous plant consciousness in which cultural identity and vegetal life remain inseparably intertwined. By proposing **Ethnophytoliterature** as a new critical framework, the study contributes to the continuing development of Phytohumanities and opens new avenues for interdisciplinary research on Indigenous literatures, environmental aesthetics, and the cultural agency of plants.



Keywords: Ethnophytoliterature; Mamang Dai; *River Poems*; Phytohumanities; Indigenous Ecological Knowledge

1. Introduction

The ecological crisis of the twenty-first century has fundamentally reshaped literary criticism by compelling scholars to reconsider the relationship between human culture and the more-than-human world. Climate change, biodiversity loss, deforestation, environmental degradation, and the rapid disappearance of Indigenous ecological knowledge have collectively challenged anthropocentric assumptions that long dominated the humanities. Responding to these transformations, ecocriticism, environmental humanities, posthumanism, and Plant Studies have increasingly argued that literature cannot be understood solely through human histories and social relations but must also account for the agency of non-human life. Consequently, rivers, forests, mountains, animals, and plants have emerged as significant subjects of literary inquiry rather than passive settings for human action (Glotfelty xviii; Buell 1–25).

Among these developments, the growing attention to vegetal life represents one of the most significant shifts in contemporary literary studies. Traditionally, plants occupied a marginal position within literary criticism, functioning primarily as decorative landscape, symbolic ornament, or metaphorical extension of human emotions. Recent philosophical interventions, however, have challenged this assumption. Michael Marder argues that Western metaphysics has consistently marginalised plants by denying them independent modes of existence, thereby reducing vegetal life to a passive background for human activity (9–18). Similarly, Jeffrey T. Nealon observes that plants require serious theoretical consideration because they unsettle conventional assumptions regarding agency, subjectivity, and life itself (1–10). These interventions have contributed substantially to the emergence of Plant Studies and the broader interdisciplinary field now frequently described as Phytohumanities.

Despite these theoretical advances, an important limitation remains. Existing scholarship has predominantly examined plants either as philosophical subjects or as components of ecological environments. Comparatively little attention has been devoted to the ways in which literature represents **plants as repositories of ethnocultural knowledge**. For many Indigenous societies, plants are neither passive biological organisms nor merely symbolic figures. They embody collective memory, ritual practice, healing traditions, subsistence strategies, environmental ethics, and ancestral knowledge accumulated over centuries. Such culturally embedded relationships cannot be adequately understood through environmental representation alone because they emerge from specific historical and cosmological traditions. Consequently, there remains a need for a critical framework capable of examining how literature preserves these plant-centred cultural epistemologies.

Ethnobotany provides an important point of departure for addressing this problem. Since the pioneering work of Richard Evans Schultes, ethnobotanical research has demonstrated that plants occupy central positions within Indigenous systems of medicine, agriculture, ritual practice, material culture, and environmental management. Gary J. Martin further emphasises that ethnobotanical knowledge constitutes a sophisticated body of ecological understanding transmitted across generations through lived cultural practice. Yet ethnobotany is primarily concerned with documenting relationships between people and plants within social and ecological contexts. It does not ordinarily investigate how poetry, oral traditions, myths, or literary narratives transform those relationships into aesthetic expression. Literature therefore preserves dimensions of ethnobotanical knowledge that remain insufficiently theorised within existing environmental criticism.

The present study addresses this theoretical gap by proposing **Ethnophytoliterature** as a new interpretative framework within the expanding field of Phytohumanities. The term combines three conceptual elements—*ethno* (people or Indigenous community), *phyto* (plant), and *literature*—to describe literary representations in which plants function as culturally situated agents preserving ecological knowledge, ritual memory, environmental ethics, and collective identity. Unlike conventional ecocriticism, which generally examines the relationship



between literature and the environment, Ethnophytoliterature directs attention towards the specific cultural lives of plants within literary traditions. It asks not merely how literature represents nature but how vegetal life becomes a medium through which communities remember, narrate, and transmit their ecological worldviews.

This framework finds a particularly productive field of application in the poetry of Mamang Dai. As one of the most distinguished contemporary writers from Arunachal Pradesh, Dai consistently situates rivers, forests, bamboo, leaves, flowers, rain, and mountain landscapes at the centre of her poetic imagination. Her work does not simply celebrate natural beauty; rather, it articulates an Indigenous worldview in which ecological existence and cultural identity remain inseparable. The landscape is simultaneously geographical, historical, ethical, and spiritual. Plants, therefore, cannot be dismissed as descriptive details because they participate actively in constructing the cultural universe inhabited by the poems.

The significance of place is explicitly acknowledged by Dai herself. In the **Author's Note** to the 2004 Writers Workshop edition of *River Poems*, she explains that she had contemplated introducing place names into the poems "to convey a sense of place, an aura of identity," while retaining the poems substantially in their original form. She also notes that the original title of the manuscript had been *Poems for Arunachal* and that most of the poems were written in Arunachal Pradesh. These remarks establish locality as an organising principle of the collection and indicate that the poems emerge from a culturally specific ecological landscape rather than from an abstract or universalised conception of nature. They also suggest that identity in *River Poems* is inseparable from the lived environment, an observation that provides a crucial point of departure for the ethnophytoliterary framework advanced in this study.

Although Mamang Dai's poetry has received increasing scholarly attention, existing criticism has largely examined her work through ecocriticism, Indigenous studies, postcolonial environmentalism, and ecofeminism. These approaches have demonstrated the importance of rivers, mountains, oral traditions, and ecological consciousness in her writing. However, relatively little attention has been devoted to the **vegetal specificity** of her poetic imagination. Bamboo, ferns, flowers, leaves, cultivated landscapes, and forest vegetation repeatedly appear throughout *River Poems*, yet they are usually subsumed under the broader category of "nature." Such readings, while valuable, tend to overlook the distinct cultural functions performed by plants within Indigenous systems of knowledge. The present study argues that these vegetal presences are not merely environmental images but active repositories of memory, ritual, ecological ethics, and ethnocultural identity.

Accordingly, this article pursues three interrelated objectives. First, it identifies the limitations of existing ecocritical approaches in explaining the culturally specific roles of plants within Indigenous poetry. Second, it proposes **Ethnophytoliterature** as a new interpretative framework capable of analysing literary representations of ethnocultural plant knowledge. Finally, through a close reading of the poems contained in the 2004 edition of *River Poems*, it demonstrates how bamboo, ferns, flowers, forests, and riverine vegetation function as living archives of Adi ecological consciousness. In doing so, the paper argues that Mamang Dai's poetry expands our understanding of plant-human relationships by revealing vegetation not simply as ecological presence but as a dynamic medium of cultural continuity, historical memory, and Indigenous epistemology.

2. Literature Review

The increasing visibility of Indigenous writing in English from Northeast India has generated a substantial body of scholarship on the works of Mamang Dai. Since the publication of *River Poems* (2004), critics have examined her poetry through diverse theoretical perspectives including ecocriticism, postcolonial environmentalism, Indigenous epistemology, Deep Ecology, ecofeminism, environmental humanities, and cultural memory. Collectively, these studies have established Dai as one of the most significant ecological voices in contemporary Indian English poetry. Yet, despite this expanding corpus of criticism, relatively little attention has been devoted



to the cultural functions of plants as repositories of Indigenous ecological knowledge and ethnocultural identity. This absence forms the principal point of departure for the present study.

The earliest ecocritical readings of Mamang Dai's poetry draw upon the foundational principles established by Cheryll Glotfelty and Harold Fromm in *The Ecocriticism Reader*. Defining ecocriticism as "the study of the relationship between literature and the physical environment" (Glotfelty xviii), these scholars redirected literary criticism from an exclusively anthropocentric orientation towards ecological interdependence. Lawrence Buell subsequently expanded this perspective by arguing that environmental literature foregrounds ethical relationships between human and non-human worlds while exposing the ecological consequences of modern civilisation (Buell 7–8). These foundational formulations have profoundly influenced subsequent readings of Dai's poetry, particularly those emphasising her representation of rivers, forests, mountains, and ecological interconnectedness.

Scholars working specifically on Mamang Dai have consistently recognised *River Poems* as a literary articulation of Indigenous ecological consciousness. Existing criticism generally argues that Dai's poems dissolve the conventional binary between human beings and nature by presenting landscapes as living participants in cultural life rather than passive geographical settings. Rivers, forests, rain, mountains, and birds emerge as integral components of communal existence, thereby challenging anthropocentric assumptions that continue to dominate modern developmental discourse. Recent studies on Dai's ecological vision similarly observe that her poetry foregrounds coexistence, reciprocity, and environmental ethics rooted in Indigenous worldviews rather than in purely Western ecological philosophy.

Another significant direction within the scholarship interprets Dai's poetry through the philosophy of **Deep Ecology**. These studies identify important convergences between the ecological philosophy of Arne Næss and the relational worldview reflected in Dai's poems. Rather than positioning humanity at the centre of existence, Dai repeatedly emphasises the intrinsic worth of rivers, forests, wildlife, and the broader ecological community. Such readings argue that her poetic imagination critiques exploitative models of development while advocating a mode of existence founded upon ecological balance and mutual dependence.

Closely related to these ecocritical interpretations are studies examining the influence of **Donyi-Polo** philosophy and Adi cosmology. Critics have observed that Dai's poetry emerges from an Indigenous epistemological tradition in which the natural world possesses ethical and spiritual agency. Rivers, forests, sunlight, rain, mountains, and seasonal cycles are not simply physical phenomena but active participants in communal memory and cultural continuity. Consequently, ecological relationships are understood less as interactions between separate entities than as reciprocal forms of coexistence sustained through ritual, oral tradition, and ancestral knowledge. Such scholarship has been particularly important in demonstrating that Dai's environmental imagination cannot be fully explained through imported ecocritical paradigms alone but must be situated within Indigenous intellectual traditions.

More recent scholarship has further expanded the discussion by situating Dai within the broader framework of Environmental Humanities. Researchers have argued that her poetry functions as an archive of Indigenous ecological knowledge capable of responding to contemporary environmental crises. Rather than merely lamenting ecological degradation, Dai preserves alternative modes of environmental thinking grounded in community memory, oral traditions, and sustainable coexistence. Her poetic landscapes therefore become sites where ecological ethics, historical consciousness, and cultural identity converge.

Despite these valuable contributions, a significant limitation characterises the existing body of criticism. Most studies employ broad conceptual categories such as **nature, environment, landscape, ecology, or non-human life**. These frameworks successfully illuminate Dai's environmental consciousness but seldom differentiate the distinct literary functions performed by specific vegetal forms. Bamboo, ferns, flowers, grasses, leaves, cultivated



fields, and forest vegetation are generally discussed collectively under the expansive category of "nature." Consequently, the culturally embedded meanings of plant life remain insufficiently theorised.

This limitation becomes more apparent when viewed alongside developments in contemporary Plant Studies. Michael Marder argues that Western philosophy has historically neglected plants by reducing them to passive organisms rather than recognising their distinctive forms of existence (Marder 9–18). Likewise, Jeffrey T. Nealon's *Plant Theory* demonstrates that vegetal life occupies important philosophical and political positions within contemporary theory. These contributions have undoubtedly transformed humanities scholarship by restoring plants to theoretical discourse. Nevertheless, their principal concern lies with vegetal ontology rather than with the literary representation of culturally specific plant knowledge.

Ethnobotany offers another productive point of comparison. Richard Evans Schultes, Siri von Reis, and Gary J. Martin have demonstrated that plants constitute indispensable components of Indigenous medicine, agriculture, ritual practice, subsistence, and environmental management. Yet ethnobotanical research primarily documents living cultural practices rather than their literary representation. It explains how communities interact with plants but not how literature preserves, reimagines, and transmits those relationships across generations.

The foregoing discussion reveals a clear research gap. Existing scholarship has substantially advanced the ecocritical, Indigenous, and environmental interpretation of Mamang Dai's poetry, while Plant Studies and ethnobotany have separately enriched our understanding of vegetal life. However, no existing framework systematically examines **how literary texts represent plants as repositories of ethnocultural memory, ecological knowledge, ritual practice, and Indigenous identity**. The present study addresses this gap by proposing **Ethnophytoliterature** as a new interpretative framework situated within the broader field of Phytohumanities. Through this framework, the vegetal imagination of *River Poems* can be understood not merely as environmental imagery but as a dynamic archive of Indigenous ecological epistemology, cultural continuity, and plant-centred modes of knowing.

3. Research Gap, Objectives, and Methodology

The preceding review of scholarship demonstrates that Mamang Dai's poetry has been examined through several productive critical paradigms, including ecocriticism, environmental humanities, Indigenous studies, Deep Ecology, ecofeminism, and postcolonial environmental criticism. These approaches have significantly expanded our understanding of Dai's ecological imagination by foregrounding the interconnectedness of humans and the natural world, the ethical dimensions of Indigenous cosmology, and the environmental consciousness embedded within her poetic landscapes. Nevertheless, the survey also reveals an important conceptual limitation. Although rivers, forests, mountains, rain, birds, and vegetation frequently occupy the centre of critical discussions, **plants themselves rarely emerge as independent categories of literary inquiry**.

Existing scholarship generally subsumes bamboo, ferns, leaves, flowers, grasses, and other vegetal forms under the broader rubric of "nature." Such an approach successfully demonstrates Dai's environmental sensitivity but simultaneously obscures the culturally specific functions performed by plants within Indigenous epistemologies. In many Indigenous societies, plants are not merely biological organisms or aesthetic embellishments; they participate in ritual practice, healing traditions, subsistence, architecture, agriculture, kinship, and collective memory. Consequently, their literary representation cannot be fully explained through ecocriticism alone. A bamboo grove, for example, signifies more than ecological abundance; it embodies a history of material culture, sustainable living, and communal continuity. Similarly, ferns, flowering plants, and cultivated landscapes preserve ecological knowledge accumulated through generations of lived experience. The absence of a critical vocabulary capable of analysing these culturally embedded vegetal relationships constitutes the principal research gap addressed by the present study.



This article therefore proposes **Ethnophytoliterature** as a new interpretative framework within Phytohumanities. Rather than replacing ecocriticism or Plant Studies, the framework seeks to complement them by concentrating specifically on the literary representation of plants as carriers of ethnocultural knowledge. It proceeds from the assumption that literature frequently preserves ecological knowledge in forms that are simultaneously aesthetic, historical, ritualistic, and philosophical. Consequently, the analysis moves beyond identifying environmental imagery to investigate the cultural work performed by vegetal life within poetic discourse.

The study is guided by the following research questions:

1. How are plants represented in Mamang Dai's *River Poems* (2004) beyond their conventional function as elements of natural description?
2. In what ways do vegetal forms preserve Indigenous ecological knowledge, cultural memory, and ritual consciousness within the collection?
3. How does the proposed framework of **Ethnophytoliterature** extend existing ecocritical and phytocritical approaches to Indigenous poetry?
4. To what extent can a plant-centred reading of *River Poems* contribute to contemporary debates in Environmental Humanities and Phytohumanities?

Corresponding to these questions, the article pursues four principal objectives:

- To examine the representation of vegetal life in Mamang Dai's *River Poems*.
- To demonstrate that plants function as repositories of Indigenous ecological memory and cultural identity.
- To formulate **Ethnophytoliterature** as a new analytical framework for reading plant-centred literary traditions.
- To contribute to the expanding interdisciplinary discourse of Environmental Humanities and Phytohumanities by foregrounding the cultural agency of plants.

Methodologically, the study adopts a **qualitative, interpretative, and interdisciplinary** approach. The primary text is Mamang Dai's *River Poems* (Writers Workshop, 2004), which serves as the exclusive corpus for textual analysis. Restricting the analysis to this collection allows a sustained examination of Dai's early poetic imagination without conflating it with themes developed in her later publications. The study employs **close reading** as its principal analytical method, attending to diction, imagery, symbolism, repetition, spatial representation, and the cultural contexts of vegetal references.

Close reading is complemented by insights drawn from ecocriticism, Plant Studies, ethnobotany, Indigenous literary criticism, and Environmental Humanities. Rather than treating these disciplines as competing theoretical systems, the present study places them in dialogue. Ecocriticism provides the ethical framework for understanding human–environment relationships; Plant Studies foregrounds the philosophical significance of vegetal life; ethnobotany illuminates the cultural knowledge embedded in plant-human interactions; and Indigenous studies contextualises the Adi worldview informing Dai's poetry. **Ethnophytoliterature** synthesises these perspectives while directing analytical attention specifically towards the literary functions of plants.

The analysis does not attempt to identify the botanical taxonomy of every plant appearing in the poems. Instead, it investigates the **literary and cultural meanings** generated through vegetal imagery. Bamboo, leaves, flowers, ferns, forest vegetation, and cultivated landscapes are therefore interpreted as textual sites where ecological knowledge, cultural memory, spiritual belief, and communal identity intersect. This approach recognises that



literary plants often possess meanings extending beyond botanical classification, functioning instead as epistemic agents within Indigenous cultural systems.

Finally, the study maintains a clear distinction between textual interpretation and ethnographic generalisation. The objective is not to reconstruct the entirety of Adi ethnobotanical knowledge but to analyse how *River Poems* imaginatively reconfigures plant life within poetic discourse. Consequently, the arguments advanced here remain grounded in the literary text while drawing upon interdisciplinary scholarship to illuminate its cultural significance.

The following section develops the theoretical foundations of **Ethnophytoliterature**, demonstrating how the proposed framework differs from ecocriticism, Plant Studies, and ethnobotany, and why it offers a productive methodology for interpreting Mamang Dai's vegetal imagination.

4. Conceptualising Ethnophytoliterature: Towards a New Critical Framework

The emergence of environmental literary studies has significantly expanded the scope of humanities research by encouraging scholars to reconsider the relationship between human beings and the more-than-human world. Ecocriticism, environmental humanities, posthumanism, new materialism, and Plant Studies have collectively challenged anthropocentric assumptions by foregrounding the ethical, philosophical, and ecological significance of non-human life. Nevertheless, within this broad interdisciplinary landscape, the literary representation of culturally specific plant knowledge has remained relatively under-theorised. Although environmental criticism has successfully demonstrated the importance of forests, rivers, landscapes, and biodiversity, it has seldom examined how literary texts preserve ethnocultural relationships with plants as repositories of memory, ritual, ecological knowledge, and collective identity. The present study addresses this theoretical gap by proposing **Ethnophytoliterature** as a new analytical framework within the wider domain of Phytohumanities.

The term **Ethnophytoliterature** is coined from three interrelated components: *ethno*, denoting people, ethnicity, or Indigenous communities; *phyto*, referring to plants and vegetal life; and *literature*, encompassing written, oral, and performative expressions of culture. The concept is introduced here not as an established academic discipline but as a **proposed interpretative framework** designed to analyse literary texts in which plants function as culturally situated agents. Ethnophytoliterature therefore investigates the ways in which literature records, preserves, and transmits Indigenous ecological knowledge through vegetal representations. Unlike conventional approaches that treat plants as decorative motifs or symbolic devices, this framework recognises them as active participants in cultural memory and epistemological formation.

The theoretical necessity of Ethnophytoliterature becomes apparent when one considers the limitations of ecocriticism. Since the publication of *The Ecocriticism Reader*, ecocriticism has fundamentally altered literary studies by establishing the environment as a legitimate object of critical inquiry (Glottfelty xviii). Lawrence Buell further argues that environmental literature foregrounds ethical relationships between human beings and the physical world while exposing the ecological consequences of anthropocentric modernity (Buell 7–8). These interventions remain indispensable for understanding literary engagements with environmental crises. However, ecocriticism generally approaches vegetation as one component of a larger ecological system. Forests, rivers, mountains, plants, and animals frequently appear together under the comprehensive category of "nature," thereby leaving comparatively little space for analysing the culturally specific meanings of individual plant forms.

Plant Studies has considerably advanced this discussion by restoring plants to philosophical discourse. Michael Marder argues that Western metaphysics has consistently subordinated vegetal life to human and animal existence, thereby denying plants their own distinctive modes of being (Marder 9–18). Rather than viewing plants as passive organisms, Marder demonstrates that they possess unique forms of growth, temporality, and relationality that challenge conventional philosophical categories. Jeffrey T. Nealon similarly contends that plants occupy



significant positions within contemporary theory because they complicate established understandings of agency, subjectivity, and political life (Nealon 1–10). These contributions have transformed the intellectual status of plants within the humanities.

Yet Plant Studies primarily addresses the ontology and philosophy of vegetal existence. It asks what plants are and how they challenge anthropocentric philosophy. Ethnophytoliterature, by contrast, asks **how plants become culturally meaningful within literary traditions**. Its principal concern is not the biological or philosophical nature of plants but the literary processes through which communities remember, narrate, and preserve their relationships with vegetal life. A bamboo grove, for example, is not merely a botanical species or philosophical subject. Within many Indigenous societies, bamboo constitutes architecture, craftsmanship, agriculture, food, ritual practice, and ecological adaptation. When represented in literature, bamboo therefore embodies an entire cultural system rather than functioning simply as natural description.

Ethnobotany provides another important foundation for the proposed framework. Richard Evans Schultes and Siri von Reis demonstrate that plants occupy central positions within Indigenous systems of medicine, subsistence, ritual, and environmental management. Gary J. Martin further emphasises that ethnobotanical knowledge represents sophisticated ecological understanding accumulated through generations of lived experience. Such scholarship has made invaluable contributions to documenting relationships between human communities and plants. Nevertheless, ethnobotany remains principally concerned with cultural practice rather than literary representation. It explains how people use plants but does not ordinarily investigate how poetry transforms these relationships into memory, imagination, or aesthetic expression. Ethnophytoliterature therefore extends ethnobotanical inquiry into the domain of literary criticism.

The proposed framework also resonates with Indigenous epistemologies that reject the Cartesian separation between nature and culture. Robin Wall Kimmerer argues that many Indigenous traditions understand plants as relatives rather than resources, emphasising reciprocity instead of domination. Such relational thinking provides an important philosophical context for interpreting literary texts in which vegetation participates actively in community life. Ethnophytoliterature adopts this relational perspective while maintaining its primary focus upon literary representation.

Within the present study, **Ethnophytoliterature** may therefore be defined as:

An interdisciplinary literary methodology that examines how plants function as culturally situated agents preserving Indigenous ecological knowledge, ritual practice, collective memory, environmental ethics, and ethnocultural identity through literary representation.

This definition distinguishes Ethnophytoliterature from existing theoretical paradigms in several important respects.

First, it treats plants as **epistemic agents** rather than passive objects. Vegetation does not merely symbolise human emotions but preserves systems of ecological knowledge accumulated within particular communities.

Second, it understands literary texts as **archives of ethnobotanical memory**. Poems, myths, songs, and oral narratives frequently encode ecological knowledge that cannot be reduced to scientific taxonomy alone.

Third, it privileges **place-specific interpretation**. Plant meanings emerge from local histories, cultural practices, and Indigenous cosmologies rather than from universal symbolic conventions. Consequently, the significance of bamboo in Arunachal Pradesh cannot simply be equated with its representation in another literary tradition.

Fourth, Ethnophytoliterature emphasises **reciprocity** rather than hierarchy. Human beings and plants participate in mutually sustaining relationships that shape cultural identity, ecological ethics, and collective memory.



Finally, the framework is fundamentally interdisciplinary. It integrates insights from literary criticism, ethnobotany, environmental humanities, Indigenous studies, cultural geography, and Plant Studies while maintaining literature as its primary object of analysis.

The usefulness of this framework becomes particularly evident in Mamang Dai's *River Poems*. In the **Author's Note**, Dai explains that the poems emerged from Arunachal Pradesh and that she had considered introducing place names to convey "a sense of place" and "an aura of identity," while retaining the poems substantially in their original form. This authorial statement suggests that locality is central to the poetic imagination of the collection. Ethnophytoliterature extends this insight by arguing that **plants constitute one of the principal media through which this place-based identity is articulated**. Vegetation is therefore neither incidental nor ornamental; it is integral to the cultural landscape that the poems seek to preserve.

Accordingly, Ethnophytoliterature is not intended to replace ecocriticism, Plant Studies, or ethnobotany. Rather, it complements these approaches by providing a critical vocabulary capable of analysing the literary representation of culturally embedded plant knowledge. By foregrounding the ethnocultural lives of plants, the framework contributes to the continuing development of Phytohumanities and offers a new methodology for interpreting Indigenous literary traditions in which vegetation functions as memory, history, ritual, and identity.

5. Ethnophytoliterary Reading of *River Poems*: Plants as Indigenous Memory and Cultural Agency

The theoretical framework of **Ethnophytoliterature** becomes particularly productive when applied to Mamang Dai's *River Poems*. While existing scholarship has generally interpreted the collection through ecocritical and Indigenous frameworks, a closer examination reveals that vegetal life performs a far more complex function than that of environmental description. Plants in *River Poems* are not incidental components of landscape; they participate in the construction of memory, identity, spirituality, ecological ethics, and Indigenous epistemology. Dai's poetic imagination consistently presents vegetation as an active cultural presence through which the Adi community negotiates its relationship with place, ancestry, and history.

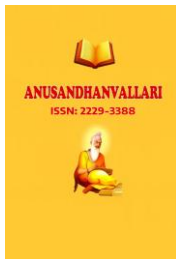
Unlike much Romantic nature poetry, where flowers, trees, and forests frequently mirror the emotional state of the individual speaker, Dai's vegetal imagery is fundamentally communal. Plants do not simply reflect private consciousness; they embody collective experience. The landscape of *River Poems* is therefore neither picturesque nor decorative. It is a lived cultural geography in which vegetation preserves the continuity of Indigenous existence. This distinction is central to an ethnophytoliterary reading because it shifts critical attention from symbolism to cultural function.

5.1 Plants and the Construction of Place

One of the defining characteristics of *River Poems* is its persistent association of identity with landscape. The **Author's Note** explicitly states that the poems were written in Arunachal Pradesh and that the poet considered introducing place names in order to convey "a sense of place" and "an aura of identity." This observation is theoretically significant because it indicates that place in the collection is not merely geographical. It is cultural, historical, and ecological.

Within this place-conscious poetics, vegetation becomes an indispensable marker of belonging. Forests, riverbanks, flowering plants, bamboo, leaves, and grasses repeatedly appear as components of an inhabited environment rather than as anonymous natural scenery. The recurrence of vegetal imagery establishes continuity between the human community and its ecological surroundings, suggesting that cultural identity emerges through sustained coexistence with the living landscape.

From the perspective of Ethnophytoliterature, place is therefore not constituted solely by territory but also by vegetal memory. Plants become living witnesses to generations of human experience, preserving relationships



that precede written history. The landscape is consequently understood as a cultural archive whose primary texts are ecological rather than documentary.

5.2 Vegetation as Collective Memory

Memory occupies a central position throughout *River Poems*. Yet memory in Dai's poetry rarely exists independently of ecological space. Human recollection is repeatedly mediated through forests, rivers, seasonal change, and vegetation. This narrative strategy distinguishes the collection from conventional autobiographical poetry because remembrance becomes inseparable from ecological continuity.

An ethnophytoliterary reading suggests that plants function as mnemonic agents. Rather than merely providing background to remembered events, vegetation actively structures remembrance itself. Forest growth, seasonal regeneration, flowering cycles, and cultivated landscapes provide temporal frameworks through which communities understand continuity and change.

This ecological understanding of memory reflects Indigenous conceptions of history in which cultural inheritance is transmitted not exclusively through written documents but through lived relationships with particular landscapes. Vegetation therefore records communal experience in ways unavailable to official historical narratives. Plants become silent custodians of ancestral knowledge, preserving cultural continuity across generations.

Such an interpretation also expands existing ecocritical approaches. Whereas ecocriticism generally emphasises environmental ethics, Ethnophytoliterature demonstrates that plants simultaneously function as repositories of historical consciousness.

5.3 Bamboo and Material Culture

Among the vegetal forms represented in *River Poems*, bamboo occupies a particularly important cultural position. Although Dai does not transform bamboo into an elaborate symbolic device, its presence evokes a wider Indigenous material world. Across Arunachal Pradesh, bamboo has historically been associated with housing, agricultural implements, food preparation, weaving, musical instruments, and ritual practice. Its literary appearance therefore invokes an entire cultural economy rather than a single botanical species.

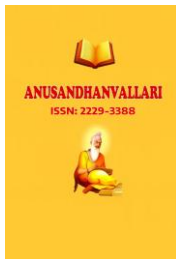
Ethnophytoliterature interprets bamboo not simply as ecological vegetation but as **material culture embodied in plant form**. The plant represents accumulated environmental knowledge developed through centuries of sustainable interaction with local ecosystems. Bamboo thus becomes an expression of ecological adaptation rather than resource extraction.

Unlike industrial materials that signify technological separation from nature, bamboo reflects a mode of habitation founded upon reciprocity between human communities and vegetal life. Dai's poetic landscape consequently presents cultural continuity and ecological sustainability as mutually reinforcing realities.

5.4 Forests as Living Archives

Forests recur throughout *River Poems* as spaces of movement, memory, silence, and spiritual presence. They are never represented as empty wilderness awaiting human occupation. Instead, forests possess their own historical and ethical significance.

Environmental criticism frequently interprets forests as ecosystems requiring conservation. While this ecological dimension is undoubtedly present in Dai's work, Ethnophytoliterature proposes a further level of interpretation. Forests preserve oral traditions, ritual practices, and communal histories that cannot easily be separated from the vegetation itself. Trees, undergrowth, and forest paths collectively constitute a living archive through which Indigenous knowledge survives.



This understanding challenges colonial conceptions of forests as economically exploitable resources. Dai instead presents them as inhabited cultural spaces whose value derives from their participation in communal life.

5.5 Plants and Indigenous Epistemology

Perhaps the most distinctive contribution of *River Poems* lies in its representation of plants as components of Indigenous knowledge systems. Throughout the collection, vegetal life contributes to an understanding of seasonal rhythms, environmental change, belonging, and coexistence. Plants do not merely occupy space within the poems; they shape ways of knowing.

Robin Wall Kimmerer's concept of reciprocal ecological relationships provides a useful point of comparison. Although Kimmerer writes from a different Indigenous tradition, her emphasis on reciprocity rather than domination illuminates the relational ethics that also characterise Dai's poetic world. Plants become companions, teachers, and participants within a shared ecological community rather than passive objects available for human use.

Ethnophytoliterature extends this insight by arguing that literature itself becomes a vehicle through which Indigenous plant knowledge is transmitted. The poems preserve ecological epistemologies that might otherwise remain confined to oral tradition or everyday cultural practice.

5.6 Towards an Ethnophytoliterary Understanding of *River Poems*

The foregoing discussion demonstrates that vegetation in *River Poems* performs multiple interconnected functions. Plants establish place, preserve memory, embody material culture, sustain communal identity, and participate in Indigenous systems of knowledge. Their significance therefore exceeds conventional ecological imagery.

This observation represents the principal contribution of Ethnophytoliterature. Rather than asking what plants symbolise, the framework asks **how plants generate cultural meaning**. Vegetal life becomes an epistemological category through which literature records the relationships between community, ecology, history, and identity.

Read in this manner, *River Poems* emerges not only as an ecological text but also as a literary archive of Indigenous plant knowledge. Dai's poetry demonstrates that the survival of cultural memory depends upon the continuity of ecological relationships. The disappearance of forests, bamboo, and other vegetal forms would therefore signify not merely environmental loss but also the erosion of the cultural knowledge embedded within them. Ethnophytoliterature makes this relationship visible by foregrounding plants as active custodians of Indigenous memory rather than passive elements of the natural world.

6. Discussion: Ethnophytoliterature as a Critical Intervention in Indigenous Literary Studies

The foregoing analysis demonstrates that Mamang Dai's *River Poems* cannot be adequately understood through conventional ecological criticism alone. Although ecocritical approaches have successfully established the collection as an important intervention in environmental literature, they generally interpret its natural imagery within the broader framework of ecological consciousness. Such readings have undoubtedly expanded our understanding of Dai's environmental ethics; however, they often subsume vegetation within the undifferentiated category of "nature." The ethnophytoliterary approach proposed in this study argues that this generalisation obscures the culturally specific functions performed by plants within Indigenous literary traditions.

The principal contribution of Ethnophytoliterature lies in its repositioning of plants from passive ecological objects to **epistemic and cultural agents**. Rather than treating bamboo, forests, ferns, leaves, flowering plants, and riverine vegetation as decorative images or symbolic extensions of human emotion, the framework recognises them as living repositories of ethnocultural knowledge. In *River Poems*, vegetal life repeatedly mediates



relationships between memory, place, ancestry, spirituality, and ecological ethics. Plants therefore participate in the production of meaning rather than merely illustrating it.

This shift has important implications for contemporary literary criticism. Ecocriticism has traditionally emphasised the relationship between literature and the environment, while Plant Studies has investigated vegetal ontology and philosophy. Ethnobotany, in turn, has documented the practical relationships between communities and plants. Yet these disciplines have rarely converged within a literary methodology capable of explaining how texts preserve Indigenous plant knowledge. Ethnophytoliterature occupies this interdisciplinary space by integrating literary criticism with ethnobotanical insight while remaining attentive to Indigenous epistemologies. It does not replace existing approaches but extends them by foregrounding the literary agency of culturally significant vegetation.

The analysis of *River Poems* further suggests that plants function simultaneously on several interconnected levels. At one level, they participate in the construction of ecological landscapes. At another, they preserve cultural memory through recurring associations with place, seasonal rhythms, and communal experience. More importantly, they embody systems of environmental knowledge that have historically been transmitted through everyday interaction with the living landscape. This multiplicity of functions distinguishes vegetal life from conventional literary symbolism. Plants do not merely signify cultural values; they actively sustain them.

Such an interpretation also contributes to Indigenous literary studies. Much scholarship on Indigenous literature has concentrated on questions of identity, oral tradition, resistance, decolonisation, and environmental justice. While these concerns remain indispensable, Ethnophytoliterature demonstrates that the vegetal world itself deserves independent critical attention. In many Indigenous traditions, plants constitute the material foundations of architecture, subsistence, ritual practice, healing, craftsmanship, and ecological adaptation. Consequently, literature that emerges from these traditions inevitably encodes plant knowledge as part of its cultural structure. Reading such texts without attending to their vegetal dimensions risks overlooking a significant aspect of Indigenous epistemology.

Another important implication concerns the relationship between literature and environmental conservation. Contemporary environmental discourse frequently emphasises biodiversity, sustainability, and ecological resilience. Ethnophytoliterature complements these concerns by demonstrating that biodiversity also preserves **cultural diversity**. The disappearance of a plant species may entail not only ecological loss but also the erosion of oral traditions, ritual practices, linguistic expressions, medicinal knowledge, and historical memory associated with that species. Dai's *River Poems* repeatedly suggests that the degradation of ecological landscapes simultaneously threatens the continuity of Indigenous cultural worlds. Through this perspective, environmental conservation becomes inseparable from cultural preservation.

The proposed framework also contributes to the continuing development of Phytohumanities. Recent work in Plant Studies has successfully challenged anthropocentric assumptions by recognising the philosophical significance of vegetal life. Ethnophytoliterature extends this intellectual movement by demonstrating that plants possess not only ontological and ecological significance but also **literary and ethnocultural agency**. They become interpreters of history, custodians of memory, and participants in the production of Indigenous knowledge. Such a perspective broadens the scope of Phytohumanities beyond philosophical inquiry and situates literary texts as important archives of plant-centred cultural epistemologies.

Although this study has focused exclusively on Mamang Dai's *River Poems*, the analytical framework possesses wider applicability. Indigenous literary traditions across South Asia, including those of the Nyishi, Gado, Apatani, Mising, Bodo, Khasi, Garo, Lepcha, and Toto communities, contain extensive representations of culturally significant plants. Similar possibilities also exist in Adivasi literatures from central India and in Indigenous writing from Africa, Australia, and the Americas. Ethnophytoliterature therefore offers a flexible methodology capable



of facilitating comparative studies across diverse cultural contexts while remaining attentive to local ecological knowledge systems.

At the same time, certain limitations should be acknowledged. The present study is confined to a single poetry collection and therefore does not attempt to reconstruct the entirety of Adi ethnobotanical knowledge. Nor does it claim that every vegetal image in *River Poems* possesses an ethnocultural function. Literary meanings remain context-dependent and should emerge through careful textual analysis rather than theoretical assumption. Future research may strengthen the framework by combining literary criticism with ethnographic fieldwork, oral history, linguistic analysis, and botanical documentation. Such interdisciplinary collaboration would further illuminate the complex relationships between literature, plants, and Indigenous knowledge.

Despite these limitations, the study demonstrates that **Ethnophytoliterature provides a productive critical vocabulary for analysing the literary lives of plants within Indigenous traditions**. By recognising vegetation as a medium through which ecological knowledge, cultural memory, ritual practice, and collective identity are transmitted, the framework expands existing conversations in Environmental Humanities, Plant Studies, and Indigenous literary criticism. In the case of Mamang Dai's *River Poems*, it reveals that plants are not peripheral elements of landscape but central participants in the cultural imagination of the text. The ethnophytoliterary perspective therefore reorients literary criticism from the general environment to the culturally meaningful lives of plants, opening new possibilities for future research in Phytohumanities and Indigenous literary studies.

7. Conclusion

This study has argued that Mamang Dai's *River Poems* constitutes a significant literary archive of Indigenous ecological consciousness in which plants perform far more complex functions than those conventionally assigned to natural imagery. Through a close reading of the 2004 Writers Workshop edition, the paper has demonstrated that vegetal life participates actively in the construction of cultural memory, ecological ethics, place-consciousness, and Indigenous epistemology. Rather than serving merely as scenic embellishment or symbolic ornamentation, plants emerge as dynamic cultural agents through which the Adi community remembers, interprets, and sustains its relationship with the living environment.

The principal contribution of this article lies in the formulation of **Ethnophytoliterature** as a new interpretative framework within the broader field of Phytohumanities. The framework has been proposed to address a conceptual limitation within existing environmental literary criticism. While ecocriticism has successfully foregrounded ecological relationships and Plant Studies has restored philosophical attention to vegetal life, neither approach has adequately theorised the literary representation of culturally embedded plant knowledge. Ethnophytoliterature responds to this gap by recognising plants as repositories of ethnocultural memory, ritual practice, environmental ethics, and Indigenous systems of knowledge. It therefore extends the analytical possibilities of environmental literary studies without displacing the important contributions of ecocriticism, ethnobotany, or Plant Studies.

The analysis further demonstrates that Dai's poetic imagination consistently situates vegetation within culturally meaningful landscapes. Forests, bamboo, leaves, flowers, riverine vegetation, and cultivated environments function as integral components of Indigenous existence rather than passive elements of physical geography. Through these vegetal presences, *River Poems* preserves a worldview in which ecological continuity and cultural continuity remain inseparable. The collection thus challenges anthropocentric models of literary interpretation by revealing that human identity is constituted through reciprocal relationships with the vegetal world. In this respect, Dai's poetry contributes not only to contemporary environmental literature but also to broader philosophical debates concerning the interconnectedness of human and more-than-human life.

One of the significant implications of the present study is its redefinition of plants as **epistemic entities** within literary discourse. Ethnophytoliterature proposes that plants do not merely symbolise cultural values but actively



preserve and transmit ecological knowledge accumulated through generations of lived experience. Literary representations of vegetation therefore become archives of Indigenous environmental thought. Such an understanding broadens the interpretative scope of literary criticism by demonstrating that ecological knowledge is frequently embedded within poetic language, narrative structure, and cultural symbolism. In the context of *River Poems*, vegetation functions simultaneously as memory, history, identity, spirituality, and ecological pedagogy.

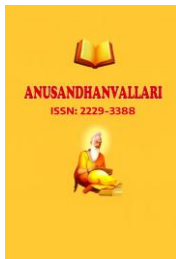
The study also contributes to the expanding discourse of Environmental Humanities by emphasising the inseparability of biodiversity and cultural diversity. The preservation of Indigenous plant knowledge is not only an ecological concern but also a cultural imperative because the disappearance of particular species frequently entails the erosion of associated traditions, rituals, oral histories, and linguistic expressions. Dai's poetry repeatedly suggests that environmental degradation threatens both ecosystems and the cultural worlds sustained by them. Consequently, ecological conservation and cultural preservation emerge as mutually reinforcing rather than separate intellectual and ethical projects.

Although the present investigation is confined to a single poetry collection, the theoretical framework developed here possesses broader applicability. Ethnophytoliterature may be employed to examine the literary traditions of other Indigenous communities in Northeast India and beyond, including those in which plants occupy central positions within oral narratives, ritual practices, agricultural systems, and ecological worldviews. Comparative studies involving Indigenous literatures from South Asia, Africa, Australia, and the Americas may further refine and expand the conceptual possibilities of the framework. Likewise, interdisciplinary research integrating literary criticism with ethnobotany, anthropology, environmental history, and cultural geography may provide richer understandings of plant-human relationships across diverse cultural contexts.

Finally, this paper does not claim to provide a definitive theory of plant-centred literary studies. Rather, it offers **Ethnophytoliterature** as a critical point of departure—a methodological invitation to reconsider the literary lives of plants within culturally specific environments. By foregrounding vegetal life as a bearer of memory, knowledge, and identity, the framework encourages a more nuanced understanding of Indigenous literary traditions and contributes to the continuing evolution of Phytohumanities as an interdisciplinary field. Read through this perspective, Mamang Dai's *River Poems* emerges not simply as a collection of ecological poems but as a sophisticated literary testimony to the enduring relationship between plants, place, culture, and Indigenous ways of knowing. It is in this enduring relationship that the enduring significance of both Dai's poetry and the proposed framework of **Ethnophytoliterature** ultimately resides.

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