

Inheriting Voice: A Gynocritical Reading of Mamang Dai's *The Inheritance of Words*

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Abstract

This paper studies Mamang Dai's *The Inheritance of Words* in the light of Elaine Showalter's idea of gynocriticism, with particular attention to women's writing, memory, and cultural inheritance. Literary history has often sidelined women's voices, and feminist criticism emerged as a way of questioning these exclusions. Showalter's work is important in this context because it encourages readers to look at women writers as creators of their own literary traditions rather than as responses to male-centred narratives. Using this approach, the paper reads Dai's text as a space where women's voices, experiences, and cultural memories come to the foreground. Drawing on indigenous traditions and the lived realities of women from Northeast India, *The Inheritance of Words* presents language as something passed down through generations, especially through women. The paper argues that the text functions as an alternative archive of memory and experience, one that challenges dominant literary frameworks and affirms the idea of a woman-centred tradition, or what Showalter describes as "a literature of one's own".

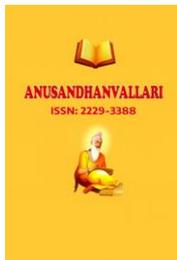
Keywords: frameworks, Drawing, feminist, dominant

Introduction

Women's writing has long been entangled with issues of visibility, authority, and inheritance. For centuries, literary history has been shaped by male-authored narratives that determined not only what counted as literature but also whose voices were worthy of preservation. In response to this exclusion, feminist literary criticism emerged as a corrective force, initially interrogating the representation of women in male texts and later turning inward to examine women's own literary production. Elaine Showalter's seminal essay "*A Literature of One's Own*" marks a crucial moment in this shift. By proposing gynocriticism, Showalter calls for a critical framework that studies women writers as creators of an autonomous literary tradition shaped by female experience, memory, language, and culture.

Mamang Dai, a prominent writer from Northeast India, occupies a distinctive position within Indian English literature. Her work resists easy categorization, drawing deeply from indigenous oral traditions, landscape, and cultural memory. *The Inheritance of Words* is not merely a poetic reflection on language but a meditation on how words are carried across generations, particularly through women who function as custodians of memory and voice. Dai expresses introducing the text that "This book is a first of its kind because it brings together the diverse voices of Arunachal women writing in English and Hindi" (Dai 2). Showalter's gynocritical lens reveals Dai's work as a compelling illustration of the creation of "a literature of one's own"—a literary domain rooted in female experience rather than being a mere reflection of prevailing patriarchal or colonial traditions.

This paper argues that *The Inheritance of Words* exemplifies Showalter's vision of a woman-centred literary tradition by foregrounding the female voice, reclaiming language as an inheritance, and constructing an alternative archive of cultural memory rooted in feminine consciousness. Showalter's gynocritical lens reveals



Dai's work as a compelling illustration of the creation of "a literature of one's own"—a literary domain rooted in female experience rather than being a mere reflection of prevailing patriarchal or colonial traditions.

Elaine Showalter and the Concept of "A Literature of One's Own"

Elaine Showalter's intervention in feminist literary criticism was both strategic and transformative. In "*A Literature of One's Own*," she critiques earlier feminist approaches for remaining tethered to male literary standards, even while challenging them. According to Showalter, much feminist criticism has been "male-oriented," focussing primarily on exposing misogyny or reclaiming women's characters within male-authored texts. While necessary, such approaches did not fully liberate women's writing from patriarchal frameworks.

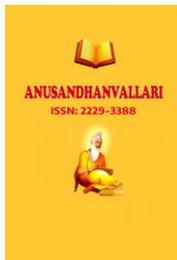
Gynocriticism, as Showalter proposes, seeks to establish a critical practice that examines women's literature on its terms. This involves tracing women's literary history, identifying recurring themes and forms, and understanding how female experience shapes narrative structures, symbolism, and language. Showalter emphasizes that women's writing often develops under conditions of silence, marginalization, and fragmentation, resulting in literary expressions that differ significantly from dominant traditions. Importantly, she argues that women inherit not only literary forms but also cultural constraints, emotional patterns, and modes of expression passed down through generations of women.

Central to Showalter's thesis is the idea of inheritance. Women writers do not write in isolation; they inherit suppressed histories, oral traditions, and emotional legacies that find expression in their work. This inheritance is frequently fragmented and informal, existing beyond established literary canons. As a result, women's writing frequently privileges memory over history, voice over authority, and continuity over linear progression. Showalter's framework becomes more complicated when it is used to look at women writers from outside the West. Writers like Mamang Dai inherit not only gendered marginalization but also cultural and linguistic displacement caused by colonialism and national homogenization. A gynocritical reading of Dai's work, therefore, must attend to the intersection of gender, culture, and language, while remaining grounded in Showalter's insistence on female-centred literary analysis.

Mamang Dai and the Context of *The Inheritance of Words*

Mamang Dai's writing emerges from the cultural landscape of Arunachal Pradesh, a region historically marginalized within mainstream Indian literary discourse. Her work draws extensively from indigenous traditions, oral storytelling, and an intimate relationship with land and nature. Unlike many postcolonial writers who focus on political resistance through overt ideological critique, Dai's resistance is subtle, embedded in memory, voice, and language.

The Inheritance of Words can be read as both a personal and collective meditation. The title itself signals a departure from conventional notions of authorship. Words are not invented or owned; they are inherited. This idea resonates deeply with Showalter's argument that women's writing is shaped by continuity rather than rupture. Dai's poetic voice does not announce itself as authoritative or final. Instead, it speaks from within a chain of voices, echoing ancestral presence and communal memory. The work's emphasis on inheritance is particularly significant in a feminist context. Historically, women have been excluded from formal modes of inheritance—property, education, and authorship. Dai reclaims inheritance not as material possession but as linguistic and cultural continuity. Words become the legacy women pass down, preserving identity in the absence of institutional recognition.



Female Voice and the Creation of an Alternative Literary Tradition

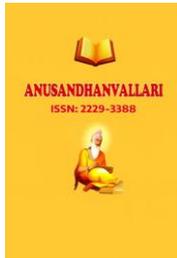
One of the most striking aspects of *The Inheritance of Words* is its commitment to voice rather than narrative dominance. Dai's poetic voice is intimate, reflective, and grounded in lived experience. It does not seek to universalize itself but remains rooted in specific cultural and emotional contexts. She incorporates various voices, empowering them with the liberty to express them based on their own choices. This results in a collection of poems, discussions, essays, and pictures etc. that altogether sing the glory of the rich history of the tribes in Arunachal. This approach aligns closely with Showalter's assertion that women's writing often resists grand narratives in favor of personal and communal truths. She further expresses her views in her work "Feminist Criticism in the Wilderness" that "To understand women's writing we must consider it within the specific social, cultural, and historical conditions that produced it." (Showalter 129).

In Dai's work, women are not merely subjects within the text; they are the very medium through which history and memory are articulated. Poems, essays, short fiction and art frequently evoke maternal figures, ancestral presences, and unnamed female voices that linger at the margins of recorded history. These voices do not assert themselves loudly, yet they endure. Their persistence challenges the assumption that power must be overt to be effective. From a gynocritical perspective, this emphasis on the female voice represents the construction of an alternative literary tradition. Dai's work does not imitate canonical forms; instead, it adapts the rhythms of oral storytelling and lyrical meditation. The result is a mode of expression that prioritizes continuity and emotional resonance over formal innovation for its own sake. In doing so, Dai contributes to what Showalter describes as a "female literary continuum", where meaning is sustained through shared experience rather than individual achievement.

The Inheritance of Words begins with feminine voice challenging the male dominant society. "A Man I Know" by Samy Moyong breaks the tradition of male poets writing about women they loved or have known. In her poem, Moyong admires and glorifies a man she had closely observed. In her next poem, "I Am" Moyong presents a strong feminine voice celebrating the strength, uniqueness and beauty of womanhood, challenging men who exploit and undermine their dignity. Not only does the work let women speak about their selfhood but also present the situation of women in the traditional society where customary laws decide women's lives and fate, leading to their ineffable suffering. Karry Padu in her photo essay exhibits the varied tags women embody in the society. In her first assessment she accepts that "I am Property", questioning the commodification of women, who are treated as 'property' of the male dominant society. The burden of the age-old norms that dictate how women should behave under the guidance of the men, she states "I followed them for my ancestors –those learned men who laid them down!" (109). Also, she satirises the rigid, male-dominated laws and customs that endure women to silently the oppression laid upon them. She exposes how tradition, morality and social order are used to justify gender inequality and suppress women's voices. Dai gives her a platform to raise her questions those have bothered her for ages, she writes –

"I never questioned anything before because it was normal, I never asked why things cannot change because how could I? How can I compare myself with the women who have fought for equal rights and for equal wages around the world? How can I compare myself to women who are allowed to speak their minds?" (Dai 112)

Also, she disturbs the readers with her evaluation of her worth and value in society. Apart from her valuation as a women she states, "I am weighted in numbers of cattle rather than gold" (Dai 114). At last she shares her 'Fear of questioning' that might lead to her alienation from the tribe and being outcasted. She also fears the forces those are stronger than her and remains worried that her questioning might fetch the wrath of the tribe upon her defying the tribal norms.



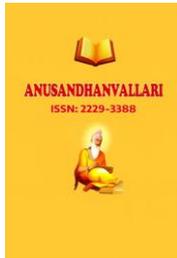
Dai brings forth the glimpses of the reaction of the society that looks down on the birth of a girl and expects women to endure childbirth one after the other with the expectation of a male child. Ayinam Ering in her poem “Offspring” presents a true picture of the society’s reaction to the birth of the girl child. She states that the firstborn girl fetches “A blissful air of rejoicing in the house” (Dai 22) in contrast to the birth of the fifth girl that leads to “A gloomy silence benumbed their hearts/ Only the wails of the labouring mother/ filled the room/ Joined by the silent howls/ Of the daughters in the corner” (Dai 23). Though the book reflects social prejudice and the harsh realities of the patriarchal society but it doesn’t fail to celebrate motherhood and its journey. Motherhood is celebrated as powerful, meaningful and nurturing. In the poem “Little Life” by Doirangsi Kri women’s ability to create life, love unconditionally and endure pain with dignity and strength is celebrated. Dai, through this collective reflection reminds us that though society devalues the girl child, the same girl grows into a woman whose role as a mother is deeply respected and life-giving. The poem therefore criticizes social injustice while simultaneously glorifying womanhood and motherhood.

The text incorporates postcolonial feminist theory, which underscores the convergence of gender, culture, and indigenous identity. Women from marginalised tribal communities, exemplified in *The Inheritance of Words*, endure a dual marginalization, both within patriarchal social frameworks and within prevailing national or colonial discourses. Postcolonial feminist critics contend this voice resists homogenisation and affirms culturally specific forms of knowledge. Dai’s refusal to generalise women’s experiences and her emphasis on cultural specificity align with this theoretical perspective, supporting Showalter’s assertion that women’s literature must be contextualised within its distinct social and cultural frameworks. The framework also includes feminist ideas about voice and silence, seeing silence not just as a lack of sound but as a limited way of expressing oneself that is shaped by social power. The quiet but persistent voices of women in the text show how endurance and continuity can be forms of resistance. Showalter posits that women’s writing frequently embodies resistance through nuanced expressions rather than explicit confrontation, consequently reconstituting telling, remembering, and narrating as political acts.

The theoretical foundation of this study positions *The Inheritance of Words* within a gynocritical and postcolonial feminist framework which prioritises women’s voices, collective memory, and culturally embedded expression. Through this perspective, Dai’s work is perceived not solely as a literary anthology but as a feminist intervention that reinterprets history and identity through women’s lived experiences, significantly enriching an evolving female literary tradition.

Feminism and Female agency

Ronnie Nido in “The Tina Ceiling” questions the existence of equality of men and women in Arunachal Pradesh. Unlike Indian feminism, it develops within indigenous social systems. Women in Arunachal Pradesh traditionally enjoy more social freedom compared to other states in India. They actively participate in agriculture, economic activities and family decision-making. Despite visible participation, women often have limited political power and leadership roles. Nido in her work, voices the equality of the genders through the character of Yarup who realises the political inequality in her village and resolves to become a Head Gaon Buri. Initially, only men were entitled to become a Gaon Bura. Gaon Buras were the Villager elders, with bright red coats who were part of local governance systems in the form of village councils. They were marks of authority, knowledge and wisdom. During the 1990s a transformation happened in the political atmosphere of the state. There were mass campaigns against child marriage and women’s empowerment. After this the community felt the need to bring women into the local governance structure. Yarup plans to help women to break the social barriers towards their freedom by “letting women have the choice to break marriages that were fixed in their infancy, reducing the fine incurred on breaking child marriages and letting women speak in the trials alongside



their husbands and fathers” (Dai 39). Dai, through her collection of works exhibits female agency in Arunachal Pradesh, which is socially visible but structurally limited. It is noteworthy that women exercise agency in personal and economic life, but their legal, political and property rights remain unequal.

A strong voice towards female agency echoes in the poem “My Ane’s Tribal Love Affair” by Ngurang Reena, through the poetic verse, explores her mother’s emotional life and her restrictive choices due to customary norms. The narrator urges her mother to think of herself and her desires after her father’s death, instead of lamenting and accepting traditional expectations. The speaker mentions that after the death of her husband she had relegated her happiness and even stopped participating in festivals. She also hints at Ane’s child marriage, which never allowed her to seek formal education:

“At thirteen, ‘traded’ for a few mithun to my father

At thirteen, ready-made for a pact, oh heavenly father

While Ane’s friends Yalam and Yapi wrapped

themselves in school uniforms,

Ane trapped herself in the inevitable transaction, a sacred contract” (Dai 44).

The speaker laments over her mother’s lost time, innocence, childhood, womanhood and love. Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak, analysing the silence, absence of voice, and subaltern women, commented that “Between patriarchy and imperialism, subject-constitution and object-formation, the figure of the woman disappears, not into a pristine nothingness, but into a violent shuttling” (Spivak 102). The speaker talks about the ‘subject-constitution’ and ‘object-formation’ of her mother and many young girls like her under the power of patriarchy. The speaker wishes to remarry her mother, who could never experience love but is forbidden by customs from doing so. She feels devastated by the prevailing treachery and dishonesty towards women and takes a resolution to not return home until she has acquired “freedom for you, many young girls and me, / waiting to taste freedom” (Dai 48).

Language, Silence, and the Feminine Mode of Expression

Showalter emphasizes that women’s writing often emerges from silence—not as absence, but as a space of gestation and resistance. In *The Inheritance of Words*, silence functions as a meaningful presence. The works acknowledge what cannot be spoken, what has been lost, and what remains unrecorded. This is well exhibited in the poem “Feels Like Something is Lacking” –

“From the tip of a nib

Whatever could be penned today

Those words, those lines

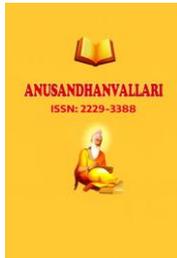
Why are they silent today?

Maybe something is there?

Which seems embedded in my heart?” (Dai 104)

This silence is not a failure of expression but recognition of historical erasure.

Dai’s treatment of language reflects a deep awareness of its limitations and possibilities. Words are fragile, easily lost, yet they carry immense emotional and cultural weight. This ambivalence toward language mirrors



the experience of many women writers who have inherited a language shaped by patriarchal and colonial structures. Rather than rejecting language outright, Dai reshapes it, infusing it with indigenous memory and feminine sensibility. In gynocritical terms, this process can be understood as linguistic reclamation. Dai does not try to learn language in the usual way. Instead, she listens to it, remembers it, and lets it happen naturally. This approach challenges dominant literary expectations of clarity, control, and authority. Instead, it affirms Showalter's argument that women's writing often values process over product, continuity over closure.

Nature as Feminine Archive and Memory Space

Nature occupies a central place in *The Inheritance of Words*, functioning not merely as a setting but as an active participant in the text's meaning-making process. Rivers, hills, forests, and seasons are imbued with memory, emotion, and voice. The poem "I am a Tree" reflects such association with nature, as Ayinam Ering states:

"I am a tree.

I'm soft. I'm gentle.

So what if I'm left defeated

by the passing seasons?

So what if fate

Decides to leave my roots entangled?

I'm alive, from inside

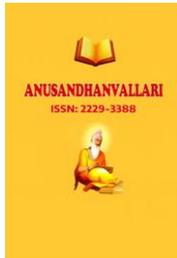
And I have the courage

To keep growing while confined". (Dai 21)

This association between nature and feminine consciousness has often been dismissed as essentialist. However, within a gynocritical framework, it can be understood as a strategic reevaluation of spaces historically aligned with women and devalued within patriarchal discourse.

For Dai, nature becomes an archive, one that preserves what written history neglects. This aligns with Showalter's observation that women's writing often turns to alternative sources of knowledge and memory. The land remembers what official records erase, just as women remember what dominant narratives silence. By embedding female experience within the natural landscape, Dai creates a mode of storytelling that is both intimate and expansive. In her last essay, "the Summit" she shares the experiences of Tine Mena, a girl from Echali, a village in the northern frontier of Arunachal Pradesh, who became the first woman from Northeast India to have climbed Mount Everest on 9 May 2011. Tine shares that she had grown up in the mountains and has worked as a porter for the Indian Army patrolling the border outpost. She adds further enriching our knowledge towards the tribe's respect for nature, "I used to travel a lot with my father through the mountains and through jungles. And he used to always say, respect the big trees. If you cut a tree, tell the tree why you are doing so, why is it necessary, if you need its help. And if you see a big river, never challenge it... You must be humble with nature. That is what my father always said" (Dai 166).

This connection between women, nature, and memory also challenges linear conceptions of time. The poems move fluidly between past and present, reflecting a cyclical understanding of history. Such temporal fluidity resonates with Showalter's critique of male-centred literary history, which often privileges progression and rupture over continuity.



Inheritance as Feminist Resistance

Inheritance, as conceptualized in Dai's work, is a deeply feminist act. It resists the notion that authority must be granted from above or validated by institutions. Instead, it affirms the power of transmission—of stories, words, and memories passed quietly from one generation of women to another. This form of inheritance is resilient precisely because it operates outside formal structures. The poem "I Am" Presents a strong female voice that affirms women's presence, strength, and significance in the world. It challenges the notion that importance and authority belong only to men. Samy Moyong's poem asserts the presence of feminine energy throughout nature but limited and destroyed by patriarchy:

"Before you dismiss me as a mere being
Someone you could trample and crush and kill
I just want you to know
That I was a candle in the woods
Burning bright in an aura of my own
I was a sparkling drop of water
In the land of the parched" (Dai 14).

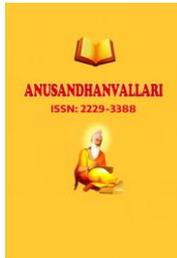
Showalter's insistence on recognizing women's literary inheritance finds a powerful echo here. The poems suggest that what women inherit may not always be visible or celebrated, but it endures nonetheless. The act of writing becomes a means of honoring this inheritance, transforming private memory into shared cultural expression. Inheriting words literally takes place in Mishimbu Miri's work "Revelations from Idu Mishmi Hymns". Miri's father, Rano Miri wanted her to become a great, powerful shaman like him. She learnt from her father to listen to hymns, chant them carefully, and follow his words. She inherited from her father not money or property but more invaluable lessons regarding 'Shamanism': "It was his idea to write down the revelations of the sacred hymns" (Dai 16).

In this sense, *The Inheritance of Words* is not only a literary work but also a feminist intervention. It asserts that women's voices matter, not because they conform to established standards, but because they sustain alternative ways of knowing and being.

Conclusion

Reading *The Inheritance of Words* through Elaine Showalter's concept of "*A Literature of One's Own*" reveals the depth and significance of Mamang Dai's contribution to women's writing. Dai's work exemplifies gynocritical principles by foregrounding female voice, reclaiming language as inheritance, and constructing an alternative archive of memory rooted in feminine experience. Rather than positioning women as marginal figures within dominant narratives, Dai centres them as active bearers of cultural continuity.

This gynocritical reading underscores the importance of approaching women's texts on their own terms, attentive to the specific histories, silences, and inheritances that shape them. In doing so, it affirms Showalter's call for a feminist criticism that does not merely react to patriarchal traditions but actively builds a literary tradition of its own. *The Inheritance of Words* stands as a testament to the enduring power of women's voices and the words they carry forward, quietly yet persistently, across generations.



Citations:

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