

## Tracing the Absent Utopia in Mamang Dai's *Stupid Cupid*

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### **Abstract:**

*This article traces the invisible yet inherent feminist utopia in North East Indian writer Mamang Dai's book Stupid Cupid. Feminist utopia somewhat reverses the reader's expectations about the possible gender roles in sectors like marriage, parenting, sexuality, work, etc. Such utopia tends to create a sphere where women can tread as freely as men. They cherish independent and empowered women. Stupid Cupid at first introduces the empowering single woman Adna from Arunachal Pradesh, managing her business in Delhi, the capital city of India. Besides Adna, Dai also brings in other women characters in the text who tries to work on their own and flourish. A mere reading of the text alludes to a sort of feminist utopia at hand, but eventually the text imprints something else. It has imprinted the presence of a 'male' figure behind the successful women depicted. Dai highlights the forces behind such possible successes of the female characters which will bar the all inherent utopian characteristics. The utopian image initially created is later on proved to be very much superficial. Mamang Dai, in order to portray an all empowering women folk has given freedom to her female characters in all spheres of life, especially in the most sensitive sectors like love, relationship and also in business. And they, in return, has redefined their gendered position by giving in to their individual choices over the choices of their male counterparts and has tried to overthrow the societal implications upon them for being the 'feminine' being. Dai's characters unknowingly restructures the conclusions conventionally drawn upon on occasions of love, marriage and work.*

### **Keywords:**

*Utopia, feminist utopia, business, love, marriage, women*

### **1. Introduction**

Thomas More is believed to have used the term 'utopia' for the first time. It means 'no place' or 'nowhere'. But the concept that has developed alluding to his book *Utopia* as a nonexistent yet a good and a happy place is quite remarking. Utopian exhibition clearly denotes the truth that it is not a real physical place but a fictionally idealized space imagined to portray what has not yet happened. Raphael Hythloday's intellectual reference to the place Utopia and its social bindings in More's *Utopia* has been indeed a suggestion for the ongoing English society for the need to develop such a convenient society, but not an actuality in existence. Authors of feminist utopia tries to expose social biases by writing about spaces which has not yet been created for women to live in. Inverting the conventional traditions, feminist utopia somewhat reverses the reader's expectations about the possible gender roles in sectors like marriage, parenting, sexuality, work, etc. Such utopia tends to create a sphere where women can walk as freely as men. They cherish independent and empowered women. Such utopian fantasy mocks the illogic behind the ever continuing discriminations against women in all spheres of their life. Feminist utopian writing has begun to be written from when women

started to claim for their rights and from when their political and social role has started to be restructured. Mary Griffith's *Three Hundred Years Hence*, Charlotte Perkins Gilman's *Moving the Mountain*, Joanna Russ' *The Female Man* are exceptional and exemplary pieces of feminist utopian writings. Even Caryl Churchill's *Top Girls* initiates this type of utopian features, the first act of this play is a presentation of superficial yet an inspiring gang of ladies of past and present who has succeeded in life. Indeed *Top Girls*' protagonist Marlene from the present century, is recently been appointed as the manager of Top Girls Employment Agency. She is so skilled and able a worker that she has overthrown a male fellow and acquired the position of the manager. The play offers a utopian corner for the women to succeed. But a deeper reading of this modern play depicts a bitter reality behind the surface level utopian success. Among the six ladies in the first act of the play *Top Girls* what is found is that Nijo, Isabella, and Patient Griselda has achieved success by being in favour of no one but men. Pope Joan has to almost outdo her femininity to be able to fulfil her dream of becoming a pope. She always appeared as a man, she knows nothing of her female body, she even could not realize when she has been pregnant. Marlene on the other hand succeeded at the cost of her middle class sister Grace. She has thrown the burden of her illegitimate child Angie over her sister so that she receives no trouble in her work and become rich. She exploits Grace's life in order to achieve hers. These women have inherited the same ideologies as patriarchy to become successful in life. As men exploits women, they have been exploiting women who are less opportune than them. This type of feminist utopia is not what Helene Cixous believed to be a uniquely empowering genre (Pfaelzer 283). Instead of reinforcing the proximity and possibility of feminism, it, in a moment thwarts the very ideals of feminism and its movements. Such feminist utopia is also slightly evident in North East Indian writer Mamang Dai's text *Stupid Cupid*.

## 2. About the author

Apart from writing, Mamang Dai is a journalist and former civil servant based in Itanagar. She has written extensively about the culture and history of Arunachal Pradesh. She is a member of the North East Writer's Forum, and has published several works of fiction, non-fiction, poetry and children's book. Her previous works include *The Legends of Pensam*, *Mountain Harvest: The Food of Arunachal*, *River Poems*, *Arunachal Pradesh: The Hidden Land* and two children's books- *Once Upon a Moontime* and *The Sky Queen*. *Stupid Cupid* in the very first introduces an empowering single woman from Arunachal Pradesh, managing her business in Delhi, the capital city of India. She is reluctant to subdue the stigmas related to people being in love outside marriage and women dealing with business. Her name is Adna. Besides Adna, Dai also brings in other women characters in the text who tries to work on their own and flourish. A mere reading of the text alludes to a sort of feminist utopia at hand, but simultaneously the text highlights the forces behind such possibilities of the female characters which will bar the all the inherent utopian characteristics.

## 3. Analysis

In the patriarchal Indian society when one speaks of business, automatically evident is the picture of a man in peoples mind. Women enters the picture as a helper and not as an owner. Although there are exceptional cases, this is the reality of an average middle class family in India. This is ascertained by the text in its initial chapter itself where Adna herself confesses that everyone mistakes her to be a man, as she says "many people who came across my name for the first thought I was a man. I didn't know why, I said, but they just assumed so" (Dai 1). Even her first caller took her as a men, believing that the owner of the agency where she wants to book a room should be as ordinarily a man as ever. That is why the caller asked "Can I talk to Mr Adna?" when Adna for the first time addresses her caller, as such,

"Can I talk to Mr Adna?' she said.

'Yes, speaking',

'Oh! I'm so sorry! I thought, for some reason...' Her voice was light and breathy"

(Dai 1).

But, irrespective of the popular image of submissive women in business, Mamang Dai has made Adna single headedly own an agency; it is a love agency which aims “to provide a decent meeting place where men and women, lovers and friends, could rendezvous without too much sweat” (Dai 1). In a conventional society, Adna owning a business of her own seems quite utopic. This is further annihilated by the fact that she is a North Eastern woman running a love agency. It can be called annihilating because there has always been a sense of strangeness towards the north-eastern part of India. People of this place are taken as somewhat alien by the people from other parts of India. And there have been several incidents of discriminations happening in the past to the people owing to North East Indian identity. Although, the scene has changed now, yet during the setting of the story it might have been prevalent. Because Dai extracts such an incident in the text. Jia, Adna’s cousin is pushed out of the cab by a local lady of Delhi and is also mocked by her due to her different outlook as can be seen in the local lady’s angry exclaim “Hey you! Jao! Jao! Go back to your own... DESH!” (Dai 52), asking Jia to return back to her own country. Despite such bigotry undergoing in the capital city Delhi, Adna’s decision to run her business there makes her an adherent participant of feminist utopia. She is confident in her way. She has successfully started her love agency for which she has been pondering over for years, to fulfil her own desire to offer a peaceful place for ‘lovers’, any sort of lovers- whether ‘legitimate’ or ‘illegitimate’ for she believes loving has nothing to do with legitimacy and illegitimacy. Four Seasons assures its customers the ‘privacy’ required and never make the customers feel insecure or humiliating in love meetings.

Adna seems to be a very open-minded lady. What society considers to be ‘adultery’ she does not. She says that “It is not quite adultery, I had said at the time. Even now, I did not see a meeting of like-minded souls as adulterous behaviour. They could even be old friends. Sometimes two people may just want some time to see if they can rediscover a lost intensity” (Dai 2). Her friend Amine further breaks in the stereotype considering marriage in Indian society which is seen mostly a monogamy by declaring that marriage possesses no intensity. So she justifies falling in love outside marriage to be “looking to rediscover something” (Dai 2). Adna herself is in a relationship with a married man. Four Seasons thus fearlessly offer rooms even for adulterous lovers without any restrictions. Adna upholds a thrilling attitude resembling somewhat fanatically utopian in nature.

Mareb, the first caller of Four Seasons is as liberal as Adna. Mareb is married and has a daughter. But her yearning and desire for her ex-lover Rohit has returned after having a sudden conversation with him some days before she arrives in the agency’s compound in Delhi. The telephonic conversation between the two lovers has taken place after many years. Both Mareb and Rohit becomes indulgent to meet each other as soon as possible forgetting about their present compulsions. They decide to meet in Adna’s agency. And eventually an affair starts between the two. Adna offers space for the illicit relation to grow without guilt. Mareb starts to be regardless of her marriage. Apart from fulfilling her wifely and motherly duties, she craves to fulfil her personal desires also. She dreams to be loved by Rohit instead of being an assistant to her husband Dayud in maintaining his public life. As is described,

“Her household had kept her running and busy for so many years, mistress of the big house and hostess to all her husband’s friends, relatives and visitors. It was enough work and occupation to fill a lifetime. But now some things were becoming different” (Dai 63).

Now Mareb is adamant to live and fight for herself a bit. Adna feels regarding this as,

“She did not care. This was self-will, and though she tried to curb it by recalling the early days of her life with Dayud, all arguments fell away because, in short, Mareb was fighting for her life” (Dai 80).

Dai has presented a utopian space in *Stupid Cupid* which qualifies everything that Adna and Mareb desires for. Mareb meets Rohit now and then without anyone poking at her. She relieves herself with him. Although she goes back to her husband’s house after spending quality time with her admirer yet she takes up every possible chance and has started to visit Adna’s agency frequently. Adna cherishes their closeness when she exerts that “I saw Mareb change right before my eyes whenever she was with him. She was changed externally, yes- her hair shone blue-black, her eyes

were elongated like those of a lynx- but she seemed changed from within too, laughing and talking as if she was being blown about by a radiant wind that made her a little breathless. I learnt that they met every day” (Dai 23). Both these ladies have been enjoying their freedom in love to such an excess that Adna exclaims, “Women in love! God help us” (Dai 24). Mamang Dai, in order to draw an all empowering women folk has given freedom to her female characters in all spheres of life, especially in the most sensitive sectors like love and relationship. And they in return has redefined their gendered position by giving in to their individual choices over the choices of their male counterparts and has tried to overthrow the societal implications upon them for being the ‘feminine’ being. Dai’s characters unknowingly restructures the conclusions earlier drawn upon on occasions of love and marriage. Adna’s broader mind-set has already restructured the idea of love, while Mareb’s liaison with Rohit restructures the interpretation of a perfect marriage. In an Indian society marriage is the most sacred thing for a woman. That is why love outside marriage has been till recently regarded as illicit even by law. Dayud’s marriage with Mareb has been his second time but his is no such big deal for he is a ‘man’ but Mareb’s affair is possible to be titled as ‘adulterous’ although not by herself. But, Adna and Mareb questions the established notions through their societal performances. Adna perceives that,

“There is love, and there is tenderness, and there are so many years of marriage and memories, of struggle and jealous rages. Yet on a clear, sunny day Mareb turned back the pages and wondered where it had all gone. She gazed dreamily at the ancient pines that stretched above and below her. She remembered the look on Dayud’s face as she had prepared to leave the house again. She pondered over the unspoken words” (Dai 79).

But society has posited Mareb and Dayud as the best couple, yet, they are not proved to be ‘the best’ in the text. Their marriage verifies the underlying temporariness and differences in marriages. And realizing it, Mareb makes a choice to create some sweet lifetime memories with her previous lover whom she was in the verge of marrying until suddenly she is made bound to marry Dayud. She spins a new love story in *Four Seasons* which has no respect within the societal norms. Yet, Mareb dares to oppose the conventional norms making herself involved in the seemingly utopian ideologies.

But this initial utopian landscape gets thwarted once it is realised that the bungalow upon which Adna has built the love enterprise is not the subject of her hard own labour. It has been conferred upon her favourably by her late aunt. If not offered Adna might not have been able to buy it, because till then she has had nothing to her credit, and adding to it is the truth that she is from an average middle class family who might have not been able to buy an apartment in Delhi, keeping in mind the fact that owning property in cities has become very expensive. Dai has made Adna privileged enough to have an aunt who knew her desire before she knew that she is city bred and thus left the bungalow for her. As she declares, “my dear aunt had bequeathed her bungalow to me for just that reason- that I was city bred, single and female, with perhaps an adventurous streak that she might have recognized as taking after her, because long ago she had left kith and kin behind to follow her desire and fall in love” (Dai 3). Apart from being the lucky one out, Adna is also helped by her cousin Yoyo in looking after the agency. Instead Yoyo is the one who bears all the trouble of the agency from looking after the construction works to registering the names of the customers. She herself ascertains that “I relied on Yoyo to deal with the workmen. They were young men like him, and came to work wearing thick rubber slippers, baggy clothes and packed caps” (Dai 32). Yoyo is a distant relative of Adna. As he did not to do further studies she has asked him to come to Delhi and thus put the responsibility of the agency upon him. Adna is even helped by her lover, who actually gave her the idea of reconstruction of the old bungalow, to build porticos and expand the veranda a bit so to make a comfortable dining hall for the guests living there. So the image of a single woman running and managing an enterprise in the capital city becomes vague here. Because, unlike majority of other women, Adna is ‘lucky’ to have a bungalow offered free of cost, to have two men behind her to give her ideas and help her out in any single trouble. It seems that the character Adna is a mockery upon the underlying feminist utopia. She has all the time a ‘man’ behind her. Her success is dependent on the invisible figures behind her whoever he be, either Yoyo or her lover.

In the description of the most liberal minded female character Mareb who has been enjoying her liaison outside marriage, Dai has made her mouthpiece Adna use the two words “escape” and “opportunity” for most of the time. Although, at the surface level the words imply nothing much, but if pondered over, the reader finds that although Mareb is freely travelling to Delhi to meet her lover yet she is indignantly tied up with some burdens from which she has to escape every time and also look for every alternative opportunity. That means although she is ‘free’ yet not free. For instance, “Mareb had taken this opportunity to escape. It would be over a week before the young couple arrived. She’d make a short trip to Delhi, to meet old friends, she said” (Dai). Again, after admitting her daughter to a boarding school in Delhi she feels a sense of guilt, she feels like neglecting her child just for the mere chance of visiting Delhi. Indeed she could never think of separating from Dayud, may be because she is unknowingly caught up in the societal norms or maybe she sees a secured future with financially established Dayud than with Rohit. What confuses is that if she is independent of her marriage than why there is the need to ‘escape’ and find ‘opportunity’. And ironically enough Mareb chooses not the absolute freedom that has been on her way after the shocking death of Amine. She returns back to her husband and her daughter and considers that to be the ‘happy’ life, leaving behind her personal desires. That means Mareb has never been ‘free’ of her familial and domestic clutches. Here lies a question as if it is never possible for a married woman to think and live for herself. The utopia created in the beginning by her is dismissed in the later part of the text. When enquired by Adna,

“I spoke to Mareb and she answered in a thin, faraway voice. ‘Hi! Yes, we are all fine’. Asinda was doing well in her new school. She would be home in the winter. How was Dayud? ‘He is very happy,’ she said” (Dai 153).

Mareb resigns to the socially defined ‘happy’ life with Dayud and Asinda.

Dai in *Stupid Cupid*, in opposition to the explicit utopian principles shown in favour of its female characters also depicts the image of Amine as helplessly welcoming death in front the men who has savagely devoured her in absence of her husband. She is murdered by the labours working in Amine’s bungalow. Not finding Adna they goes to Amine whom they often see with Adna in the bungalow in demand of some money. Amine has refused to give them money, and so they slaughtered her taking the advantage of her husband’s absence. It seems that Mamang Dai somewhat hints at the impossibility of women to survive alone. They will need a ‘male’ figure always with them or supporting them from the back.

#### 4. Conclusion

Amine’s death is shocking to Adna, she is hurt broken. But she is also afraid. She seems to be afraid of living alone in her apartment. So she decides to travel back to her homeland, pouring all of business responsibilities upon Yoyo. While Yoyo can handle his emotions and live back to look after the enterprise she dares not. Indeed Adna is blessed to have always someone available at her hand. Yoyo takes care of her agency and her lover takes care of her mind because he has kept on calling her while she has been in home, asking about her, assuring her of his love. Even Mareb is also blessed to have Dayud as her husband and Rohit as her temporary love partner. The pictures of both of these women has although created an extraordinary feminist utopian possibility in the beginning of the text yet they have completely turned it upside down by the end of the same text. Terror-stricken Adna going away to her family house in Arunachal Pradesh and Mareb securing herself by joining hands with her husband again, both leaving aside their dearly established work and personal wishes respectively, is the peak point of proving feminist utopia as something very superficial. An analysis of these two main characters surmounts the already taken for granted fact that for a woman to flourish support of men is necessary in one way or other.

Yet, it can be drawn that Mamang Dai has presented at least one possibility for women to be able to in independence and freedom. It is through the character Jia. Jia has lost her baby at the age of eighteen. And when her husband turns out to be abusive and irresponsible for the incident she left him, rather kicked him out. She has been unable to bear the injustice meted to her. When her parents required her to go back to her husband so that she does not have to live her life all ‘alone’, she fought

with her parents and left home to come to Delhi to pursue her career in Journalism and explore her abilities. She is not the privileged child with everything at hand. She is surviving without the help of her husband or others because she fears not to live alone. She has taken the right decision in coming to pursue her desired course. Because she rationalises the things and is real to herself and also to others, as can be seen,

“Jia called a spade a spade and her reports were about perspective. Gender talk is for those who could afford it, she said. In our villages there is no time to even think about these things. Women carry firewood and fetch water and men clear the forest for planting. We sow paddy and men erect fences to protect the fields. Everyone works. No one can afford to be sick. Even of the young man who had claimed part of her life she simply said: We were too young and too poor” (Dai 29).

Instead of being fanciful Jia is real. Even Adna’s friend Green and her helper Shiela are hardworking women trying to stand in their own feet without being favoured by luck. They sets example for possibility of women to be independent who are not bequeathed by others in love like Adna and Mareb. Thus, *Stupid Cupid* although cultivates an invisible utopia in the beginning by expressing the bold and flourishing experiences of Adna and Mareb yet, it unties the knot and let the readers know the forces behind such exposure.

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