

Counter-Monumentality in Indigenous Women's Literature: A Comparative Analysis of *The Black Hill* and *Wild Swans*

Kulandai Therese

Abstract: *Memorialisation serves as a crucial space for individuals to express emotions, share stories and find solace in collective grieving. Through literary documentation, this process also fulfils the important function of preserving historical memory by recording significant events, individuals and cultural heritage. However, the act of documenting historical events, especially when left to an authorised few, can lead to the propagation of biased or one-sided narratives. These narratives may uphold certain cultural ideals and values while marginalising others. This ultimately contributes to the dismantling of cultural ideals that do not fit into the dominant narrative. This phenomenon aligns with the concept of “dismantled cultural ideals” (“Enacting Remembrance: Turning Toward Memorializing September 11th” 499) as described by Pivnick. When historical documentation prioritises certain perspectives over others, it can lead to the erasure or distortion of cultural traditions, beliefs and experiences that diverge from the dominant narrative. This selective preservation of history perpetuates power dynamics and exposes existing inequalities within society. These indigenous women writers not only commemorate figures of the past but also celebrate the ordinary family life. Through the act of memorialisation, Dai and Chang reiterate the history of their homeland by making use of the concept of counter-monumentality which may also be referred to as “anti-monumentality” (Stevens et al. 956) to counter the official documentation of their homeland. While some events may be forgotten, others are given importance and considered worthy of memorialising; some emerge to the surface after a long period of submersion.*

Keywords: counter-monumentality, historical fiction, memorialisation, indigenous woman.

Historical narratives play a vital role in elucidating the significance of preserving the past or the memory of past events. They help in the reconstruction of cultural heritage once destroyed in historical conflict and in this case, a civil conflict. But at times, these historical narratives take the form of disregarding the voice of the natives or the common folk or in the words of Mamang Dai, an Arunachali writer, “lost stories” (*The Black Hill* ix). She imbues in her readers of ways to memorialise historical figures and events by providing a space for these “lost stories” (ix).

Memorialisation, in the conventional sense of the term, would indicate the commemoration of a past event that has been considered magnificent on the national or global level by constructing monuments/ structures of that particular past or individuals. In some cases, memorialisation may also take place in terms of ceremonial practices where people assemble at a chosen site. Memorialisation occurs when a group or a community experiencing a shared traumatised event, consciously attempts to preserve the memory of such events. But more than just an attempt to cope with such painful events, it tries to restore what has been lost by an act of commemoration. Thus,

Memorials are, by definition, designed with a purpose. It is rare, though perhaps less so now than in the past, for memorials to be designed to accommodate a range of narratives, particularly when that range includes opposing narratives. Most public memorials are designed to promote a hegemonic political or spiritual vision of the people or events concerned. (Hopwood 9)

In “Enacting Remembrance: Turning Toward Memorializing September 11th”, Billie A. Pivnick defines ‘Memorialising’ as an “act that involves shared memory and collective grieving—aiming also to restore severed communal bonds and dismantled cultural ideals. As such, it is a form of cultural

renewal that can transform traumatized mourners into an ethical community of memory” (499).

The significance that the word ‘memorialisation’ has, in engaging an individual or a community with the remembrance of ideal figures of the past, is an understatement. Pivnick’s statement on memorialisation as “collective grieving” signifies a traumatic event that affects a group or a community that then results in intense pain and suffering. Furthermore, memorialisation as a “cultural renewal” may be considered an outlet for emotive behaviour for both the survivors and the perpetrators of such traumatic events.

These indigenous women writers not only commemorate figures of the past but also celebrate the ordinary family life. Through the act of memorialisation, Dai and Chang reiterate the history of their homeland by making use of the concept of counter-monumentality which may also be referred to as “anti-monumentality” (Stevens et al. 956) to counter the official documentation of their homeland. While some events may be forgotten, others are given importance and considered worthy of memorialising; some emerge to the surface after a long period of submersion.

Writers such as Dai and Chang voice out their concern for the marginalised and “forgotten” (*The Black Hill* 287) in their select novels. They are able to memorialise not only lost lives but also those who were overlooked. The process of memorialising historical events has transformed in countries that have been affected by conflict or wars and in particular, the Holocaust. In his work, *At Memory’s Edge* (2000), James E. Young, a critic of monument theory, takes note of these transformations when he states that, “there has been a metamorphosis of the monument from the heroic, self-aggrandising figurative icons of the late nineteenth century celebrating national ideals and triumphs to the antiheroic, often ironic and self-effacing conceptual installations that

mark the national ambivalence and uncertainty of late twentieth-century postmodernism” (93). However, to further understand the concept of counter-monumentality in works of fiction, we may thus look at counter-monumentality as a counter-memorialising strategy as purported by Quentin Stevens, et al. In their article, “Counter-monuments: the Anti-monumental and the Dialogic”, traditional monuments are typically affirmative:

glorifying an event or a person, or celebrating an ideology. In contrast, anti-monumental works generally recognise darker events, such as the Holocaust, or the more troubling side of an event that in other times might have been glorified, such as a war...Whereas traditional monuments recognise famous figures or the heroism of unknown soldiers, a growing number of anti-monumental works recognise the suffering victims of conflict or persecution and admonish the perpetrators. (955)

Dai and Chang utilise the concept of counter-monumentality or “anti-monumentality” (Stevens et al. 956) to counter the “official versions” (*The Black Hill* 293) of their homeland to provide a voice to stories that have been marginalised or excluded from official documentation. *The Black Hill*, which has been viewed as a historical novel, centralises the personal theme, namely, love, that Dai encapsulates through the story of Kajinsha and Gimur. Gimur’s decision to marry a man from outside her clan holds significant ramifications for both her existence and the wider community. In tribal societies, clan affiliations are deeply ingrained, influencing social structures and relationships. Gimur’s choice challenges these norms, which results in the tension between individual desires and communal expectations. Gimur’s marriage outside her clan generates an exploration into the complexities of social integration and cultural assimilation, which is also reflective of broader themes such as cultural change and adaptation within tribal communities:

The mention of the Mishmee brought back memories of Gimur and her flight. Lendem thought: a daughter of the village had caused uproar, running away to a place near Tibet, and here they were, these migluns, asking about a path to Tibet. Why should we even entertain their questions? (*The Black Hill* 89).

The condemnation from Lendem, a representative of the Abor community, reflects the deeply ingrained cultural norms and expectations surrounding inter-clan marriage. Gimur’s decision to defy these norms by eloping with Kajinsha causes an “uproar” (89) within the community that disapproves of her actions. Her secret flight left her mother fending for herself and as food was scarce, “the old woman had been digging the ground for yam when she fell and rolled down to the bottom of the hill... She was lying there dead when they found her” (167). Dai shows how a single person’s action can affect the entire close-knit Abor community. The narration explores the interconnectedness of individual choices and communal dynamics. Gimur’s elopement disrupts social norms ultimately leading to tragic consequences for her mother. This highlights the influence that individual actions can have on community life.

In *Wild Swans*, the portrayal of the “complex issues” (Stevens et al. 958) pertaining to her parents’ relationship can indeed be seen as a form of anti-monumentality, aligning with what has been proposed by Stevens, Franck, and Frazakerley. The concept of anti-monumentality suggests a departure from traditional forms of commemoration, emphasising that which is “more negative and more complex” (958). Chang’s parents’ experiences reflect the tumultuous events of twentieth-century China, including political upheaval, social change and personal struggles. Their story reveals the complexities of love and family amid extraordinary circumstances which also mirrors broader issues such as the impact of political ideology and social expectations. By memorialising them, Chang not only honours her parents’ experiences but also sheds light on the complexities of Chinese history and culture.

Marriage had traditionally been a contract between families, and there had never been civil registration or a marriage certificate. Now, for those who had ‘joined the revolution’, the Party functioned as the family head. Its criteria were ‘28-7-regiment-I’—which meant that the man had to be at least twenty-eight years old, a Party member for at least seven years, and with a rank equivalent to that of a regimental commander; the ‘I’ referred to the only qualification the woman had to meet, to have worked for the Party for a minimum of one year (*Wild Swans* 146).

The institution of marriage in the pre-communist era commenced when the relatives of the groom would pay a visit to the girl’s house and make a physical inspection of her, especially her feet. Chang alludes to the changes made by the new dispensation on marriage during and after the Communist Revolution. Keeping in mind that people must obey the rules laid down by Mao regarding marriage as the “Communist Party was the new patriarch” (*Wild Swans* 144), her father decided to write to the Jinzhou City Party Committee where he would ask their permission to “‘talk about love’ (*tan-lian-ai*) with my mother, with a view to marriage” (*Wild Swans* 144). When her parents fell in love with one another on their trip to Jinzhou, her father

wrote some beautiful poems for my mother there. Not only were they in very elegant classical style, which was a considerable accomplishment, but she discovered that he was a good calligrapher, which raised him even higher in her esteem” (*Wild Swans* 143).

These were later destroyed when the Red Guards raided their homes. Many times her mother had decided to divorce her father on account of him putting the party before her as in her trauma at the time of her marriage. Had he heeded her request to take her home in the car, Chang’s mother felt that they could have prevented the loss of their first child. Towards the end of the novel and before his death, we see him in a delusional state and it is his wife who rescues him every time he is imprisoned. When he was home, he physically abused his wife to the point that they had to move elsewhere, away from listening neighbours. Chang critiques Mao’s power to ruin the lives of the ordinary people of China, like Chang’s parents, who reposed full faith in the Communist Party, and its plan to make China great. The portrayal of marriage during the Communist regime in China serves as an anti-monumental

act of commemoration, as it challenges conventional narratives and exposes the multifaceted nature of relationships during this catastrophic phase of political and social transformation in China.

Historical narratives like “traditional monuments” (Stevens et al. 955) may be perceived as tangible, permanent and accepted. However, in her novel, Dai captures and emphasises the “troubling memories” (956) of Gimur that are part of her inner struggles to make sense of her present. These troubling memories are in “abstract form rather than figuration” (956). Typically, troubling memories would signify unwanted memories that would rather be forgotten. Dai departs from conventional portrayals of historical narratives relying instead on concrete, tangible images or events even as she employs abstract symbols or impressions that evoke deeper emotional and psychological resonance. This abstraction allows for a more intensive exploration of Gimur’s inner struggles and the complex interplay of memory, trauma and identity:

All the words of her dead aunt Moi, and the premonitions and cryptic warnings of Nago returned to her in a rush of remembrance. What had her mother told her? ‘Trust your instincts. It is the way to survive.’ Yes. Gimur squeezed her eyes tighter. ‘Hold fast. Believe that anything can happen.’ Her limbs felt heavy. Her mind was still far away and her face was furrowed with thinking (*The Black Hill* 238).

Rather than celebrating heroic achievements or triumphs, Gimur’s memories highlight the darker aspects of her past that serve as an important component in emphasising the interplay between the past and the present.

In another instance, as Gimur is waiting for Kajinsha’s return from Marpa’s house in Sommeu, she involuntarily remembers a story about a young bride never reaching her intended destination and disappearing without a trace, triggering an emotional response in her. Its haunting nature and unresolved ending resonate with her feelings of uncertainty and unease regarding her husband’s behaviour, particularly his involvement with Chhomu in Sommeu. This emotional response deepens Gimur’s introspective nature and prompts her to confront her fears and doubts. The bride’s journey towards an uncertain fate mirrors Gimur’s journey into the “unknown” (*The Black Hill* 61) dealing with the complexities of loyalty and betrayal. By reflecting on this story, Gimur gains a new perception of her circumstances and challenges. Despite being “troubling” (Stevens et al. 956), these memories ultimately empower Gimur to rely on herself and make sense of her situation independently. By engaging with her memories and drawing parallels to her own life, Gimur understands her experiences, making decisions that reflect her values and desires. In this way, “troubling memories” (Stevens et al. 956) shape personal growth and self-reliance that help affirm her self-sufficiency even when confronted with challenges. This self-reliance slowly develops and builds her into a strong and confident woman living in a male-dominated society. Without hesitation, she treads through the wilderness and dense forest of Arunachal Pradesh with her enfeebled son and stepson Awesa to return to her home in Mebo,

There was nothing she wanted to take with her. Her pathetic belongings were not worth carrying. Her knife was securely tied around her waist and whatever she needed she would get from the land. She wrapped the baby in her old green ga-le and stepped out. A blast of wind almost forced her back into the house. She bent her head and walked out feeling the wind whistling in her ears (*The Black Hill* 153).

The concept of anti-monumentality further becomes constructive in the exposition of the misconstrued past which is often memorialised officially. Where traditional monuments are commemorated to glorify an ideology, an event, or a person, anti-monumentality, on the other hand, finds a way to emphasise the “darker events” (Stevens et al. 955). In *Wild Swans*, the “darker events” (955) are vividly depicted by the author and their influence in shaping the lives of the three generations of women: the grandmother (Yufang), the mother (De-Hong) and the writer Jung Chang.

The “darker events” (Stevens et al. 955) in the life of Chang’s mother, De-Hong, take a traumatic turn when she and her classmates are made to watch Japanese horrific “newsreels” (*Wild Swans* 67) as part of their education:

The films showed Japanese soldiers cutting people in half and prisoners tied to stakes being torn to pieces by dogs. There were lingering close-ups of the victims’ terror-stricken eyes as their attackers came at them. The Japanese watched the eleven and twelve-year-old schoolgirls to make sure they did not shut their eyes or try to stick a handkerchief in their mouths to stifle their screams. My mother had nightmares for years to come (*Wild Swans* 67).

De-Hong’s exposure to graphic violence and brutality at a young age leaves a lasting impact on her psyche. Being exposed to such acts of violence desensitises her emotions to some extent, which later results in her ability to endure and cope with the harsh realities of her environment. This desensitisation, while initially a form of survival mechanism, ultimately contributes to her fortitude which she later displays when confronted with difficulties. The irony of De-Hong’s desensitisation to violence lies in its dual nature: it exposes the miserable life she and others like her had to endure under Japanese occupation, and yet it also subconsciously prepares her resilience in her later years. The darker events in De-Hong’s life, particularly her traumatic experiences during her education, function as anti-monuments that challenge conventional narratives of childhood innocence and education.

When Chang’s mother was pregnant with their first child, her father, who was completely dedicated to the cause of the Revolution, did everything in his power to please the Communist ideologies of the anti-bourgeoisie, even at the cost of his wife’s life. This was when she silently suffered through her journey as a young communist follower who had just lost her baby without the help of her family, especially her husband:

She went over to where my father was sitting and asked him to take her home in his car. She did not tell him about

the pain. He looked round to where his driver was sitting and saw him glued to his seat, open-mouthed. He turned back to my mother and said: 'How can I interrupt his enjoyment just because my wife wants to leave? ...She walked all the way back to the barracks in excruciating pain. Everything in front of her eyes was spinning... She fainted as soon as her head hit the bed. She had lost her first child (*Wild Swans* 168).

In the above passage, Chang depicts the "darker events" (Stevens et al. 955) that women endured during periods of political mayhem, as well as the repressed trauma within history. Through this silencing of her miscarriage, whilst soldiering on for the Communist cause, Chang demonstrates the level of repression and trauma experienced by women during turbulent periods in history. Despite her physical and emotional pain, Chang's mother prioritises the revolutionary ideals over her well-being, exposing the sacrifices and struggles faced by countless women whose experiences have been overlooked or marginalised in official commemorations. Through the miscarriage scene, Chang defies the glorification of Communist ideology and its emphasis on collective struggle over individual well-being. Chang's father's brutal disregard for his wife's suffering in favour of upholding revolutionary principles exposes the hypocrisy inherent in some interpretations of Communist ideology. This challenges the traditional narrative of Communist heroism and martyrdom, simultaneously disclosing the human cost and personal sacrifices often obscured by political discourse. In personalising her mother's traumatic experiences, Chang in effect, humanises the larger historical narrative, turning it into something more relatable to her readers. The miscarriage becomes a symbol of the individual struggles and sacrifices which also emphasises the human dimensions of history that are often overshadowed by grand political narratives.

The "darker events" (Stevens et al. 955) in Chang's life turn her into an introvert who wishes to be "truant" (*Wild Swans* 344) every time a new order is passed by Mao; the torture of her teachers, witnessing her father's failing mental state or even having to witness her father physically abusing her mother—all these incidents in her life makes her "recognise[s] the suffering victims" (Stevens et al. 955) including herself whilst exposing the damaging effects of Mao's ideology on China. Despite the pressure to conform and obey, Chang's introversion and desire to escape expose the psychological toll of living under Mao's regime. Her lived experiences reveal the destructive effects of ideological indoctrination and the suppression of those who opposed it, challenging the glorification of Mao's leadership and the official narrative of the Cultural Revolution.

Apart from acknowledging *Wild Swans* as an "anti-monumental" narrative that commemorates and "recognise[s] the suffering victims of conflict or persecution" (Stevens et al. 955), the novel shares the discontent that ordinary citizens feel with Maoist ideologies. It is towards the end of the novel that Chang begins to describe her parents' discontent with the Communist Revolution. In the wake of communism in her country, De-Hong is seen to be very dedicated to the cause of the revolution not only to make China great but to find an outlet for the frustration at the discrimination and bias towards women. It was this hope for women's betterment that

drew Chang's mother towards the Communists. She is seen to fully embrace communism first by helping to hand out leaflets, organising protests, and being part of the Women's Federation. She travelled across difficult terrains to prove her loyalty to the cause, all at great personal risk. Her father too had strongly believed in fighting for the cause. However, Mao's ideologies created doubts in her parents such as the formation of The Great Leap Forward campaign that led to starvation and "premature deaths...between 16.5 and 30 million" (Li 841) Chinese people:

The Great Leap Forward and the appalling famine shook my parents deeply. Although they did not have the full picture, they did not believe that 'natural calamities' were the explanation. But their overwhelming feeling was one of guilt. Working in the field of propaganda, they were right in the centre of the misinformation machine (*Wild Swans* 286).

After the famine, her parents, like many other officials working for the Communist Party, were no longer "passionately devoted to their work as they had been in the 1950s" (*Wild Swans* 307). Being branded as anti-Mao policymakers and "capitalist roaders" (409), her parents were officially denounced. They were treated as traitors of Mao and "deserters" (Stevens et al. 956) of Communism. They had ink poured over their heads and were forced to wear denouncing placards around their necks. This torture had a lasting impact on her father, physically and mentally. One day after one of the meetings of her "denounce[ment]" (*Wild Swans* 410), her mother "came home with her face twisted in pain. She had been ordered to kneel on broken glass" (410).

Her mother wanted to protect her children from knowing the full truth about what had been happening to her. As she did not want them to worry about her, she made it sound as "undramatic as possible" (*Wild Swans* 411). The actions of her mother exemplify the anti-monumental commemorative strategy of the "heroism of deserters" (Stevens et al. 956). Throughout the memoir, Chang's mother has been depicted as a strong woman, both physically and mentally. When she was a young girl, she excelled in sports but her excellence was suppressed as she was ordered to let the others win for political reasons (*Wild Swans* 69). To prove her loyalty to the Communist Party, she treads a difficult journey that takes a heavy toll on her personal life. She travels long distances to apply for release from her husband's imprisonment by the party. Chang's mother may be considered as one of the "deserters" (Stevens et al. 956) of Maoism but her desertion may be considered as an act of heroism. Travelling long distances and pushing hard for her husband's release required immense courage and sacrifice on Chang's mother's part. This was only possible through asserting control over her own life and securing the needed empowerment to challenge oppressive systems.

The memorialising strategy in *The Black Hill* and *Wild Swans* involves a recollection of personal and collective memories, often intertwined with myth, folklore and history that form a collective remembrance, confronting historical traumas and injustices while also celebrating resilience and cultural continuity. Dai uses a lyrical and introspective narrative style,

inviting readers to engage with the characters' memories and reflections on the past.

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