

Native Past And The Needy Present: A Critical Reading of Mamang Dai's *Legends of Pensam*

Kalyani Hazarika

Assistant Professor,

Dept. of English

Mahapurusha Srimanta Sankardeva Viswavidyalaya,

Nagaon, Assam

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Abstract

North East Indian Literature is marked by a unique presence of nature and environment. The beauty of the landscape enriched with different species of flora and fauna, mighty rivers, high mountain ranges add on a vibrant culture and tradition existing among the tribal of North East. It shows rich ethnic diversity of the region. The relationship between man and nature in Indian English writing, more specifically from North East, has been depicted by a handful of writers of the region. Mamang Dai's *The Legends of Pensam* is written in lyrical prose and evokes the memories of an entire community of people. It represents the predicaments of the sensitive young minds of the contemporary Arunachal Pradesh. They find difficulty to come in terms with the inevitable break with the enchantment of the past and to re-model their lives according to the demands of the changing times. Through this paper the researcher will make an attempt to study how the people who practiced animistic faith in community-oriented setups suddenly came face-to-face with the realities of Western modernity, the Christian religion and individualism as a way of existence.

Keywords- Ecology, Myth, Identity, Environment, Nature, Tradition

Introduction

Mamang Dai's *The Legends of Pensam* is written in lyrical prose and evokes the memories of an entire community of people. It represents the predicaments of the sensitive young minds of the contemporary Arunachal Pradesh. They find difficulty to come in terms with the inevitable break with the enchantment of the past and to re-model their lives according to the demands of the changing times. With her powerful lyrical style, in verse as well as in prose, Mamang Dai depicts the experiences of the new generation who inhabit what she calls in-between places of the mind. Mamang Dai uses the ancient myths and rich tribal folklore in a framework of past historical events and contemporary reality to build up a complex document that celebrates both the commonplace and the mystic in nature and life.

In this context, it can be said that *The Legends of Pensam* has the potential for becoming an ideal text for an ecocritical analysis from the point of both thematic and technical considerations. The analysis in the subsequent sections would try to ascertain the ways in which sweeping social, political and economical changes have impacted upon the ethnic life-world of the Adis, and how they have responded to such changes.

Nayar in his book *Contemporary Literary and Cultural Theory* (2013) mentioned ecocriticism as a critical mode that looks at the representation of nature and landscape texts. The more focus is paying particular attention to attitudes towards 'nature' and the rhetoric employed when speaking about it. To quote Nayar,

It aligns itself with ecological activism and social theory with the assumption that the rhetoric of cultural texts reflects and informs material practices towards the environment, while seeking to increase awareness about it and linking itself (and literary texts) with other ecological sciences and approaches. (2013: 242).

A tribe is a social division in a traditional society consisting of families or communities linked by social, economic, religious, or blood ties. They have a common culture and dialect with a typical language. They have a shared cultural and historical tradition, and an identifiable territory. Ethnic group is particularly an appropriate term for a tribe where one's identity and claims to landownership may depend less on extensive kinship ties than on one's natural village or region of origin. The oral literature is a kind of lens through which one can view a vibrant story-telling tradition. Most of the North-East community tribal people possess the oral tradition. The old story-telling tradition, common to all oral cultures of aboriginal people, has been creatively integrated into modern literary genres to give a distinct identity to the literature of the region. The 'Adi' tribe is one of the 26 major tribes of Arunachal Pradesh, lying at the foothills of Himalayas. They believe in co-existence with the natural world and the spirit that is part of the forests, rivers and the valleys. Thus, their stories reflect a half-revealed and half-concealed world so that the outsiders hardly believe the legends of the tribes. Adi is a common term denoting the hill men, and it includes a number of groups. It may be applied to all the hill tribes around the Brahmaputra valley. The Adi are concentrated in the East and West Siang districts of Arunachal Pradesh. They believe that every object-human beings, animals, trees or birds have a spirit that needs to be nourished and propitiated. The Adi tribes depend on nature for many of their needs and they believe that equilibrium in nature must always be maintained. Even though hunting is considered not just a means of procuring food but also an expression of courage and skill, they still believe that man must hunt for survival but not for greed. The tribal societies have their specific historical, cultural and geographical locations, and they have retained and reproduced the distinctive traditions through their different languages.

Objectives

- To understand the unique position of the North East with respect to the rest of India;

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- To appreciate how the topographical, cultural and political distinctiveness generate a very unique kind of literature from this region;
- to be able to understand the specificities of Arunachal Pradesh and locate Mamang Dai as a writer from Arunachal Pradesh and from the North East;
- To realize that *The Legends of Pensam* is a modern response to an ancient and traditional culture that both particularizes and universalizes its extant reality.

Discussion

The novella *Legends of Pensam* is set in the territory of Adi tribe in the mountains of Arunachal Pradesh. It is a land of mountains, rivers, old legends, spirits, and beliefs. Mamang Dai weaves stories of the Adi tribe with their myths, legends, oral history, and daily living patterns. Born and brought up in the Adi tribe, she knows many people and their legendary stories. Her novel provides rare glimpses into the life of the tribal community. Mamang Dai brings her personal knowledge of the primitive customs and beliefs of her people to narrate many legends that influence the lives of Adi tribes. She expresses their life with first-hand experience. In an interview to *The Hindu*, Literary Review, when Mamang Dai has been asked whether the novel *The Legends of Pensam* is an attempt to record a disappearing tradition by the face of modernity, her reply is:

In a way, yes. Ours is an oral tradition you know, I was trying to meet people and collect and record these oral narratives. You know, the small histories which were getting lost and when you talk to people even small things can trigger these memories off. I had no idea how the book would turn out because it was very difficult to project these stories in English. To negotiate that (difficulty of cultural translation) I conceived of *Pensam* as a kind of secret garden where there are no rules and where one can do whatever one wants. I was a little nervous about how the novel would be received back home. But I must say the people were very responsive. When they heard the book had been released in Delhi, in my hometown, which is Pasighat, they were shouting, “we want the book, we are the people of *Pensam*.”

The Legends of Pensam is a set of stories interconnected across a few generations of a family that makes the book more of a novel. There are a host of memorable characters steeped in traditional tribal beliefs and living vulnerable lives influenced by spirits, shamans and unnatural events. People have premonitions-women dream dreams, babies are born who grow up unnaturally fast, like deer or lion cubs, a fisherman has a vision of Biribik, the monstrous water serpent and as everyone could have predicted dies within a year unable to recover from the aftereffects of that terrible vision. This also augurs that something unexpected was bound to happen. So, no one is surprised when the Hoxo's father, Lutor, is killed in a hunting expedition mistakenly shot by his own friend. Such deaths are accepted as being caused by displeased nature or spirits. Like the majority of tribes inhabiting the central belt of Arunachal, the Adis practice an animistic faith that is woven around forest ecology and co-existence with the natural world. Under the malign influence of spirits anything can

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happen in a life-persons get unnaturally killed in hunting expeditions, children suffer strange illnesses, houses get gutted in fire, husbands go astray. These things happen because certain rights are not performed by people of this or earlier generation. Shamans play an influential role in the tribe as they have the power to exorcise the bad spirits and restore some order in life.

The first four stories in the first section are independent stories and thus not really in continuity except for the fact that some characters are common. They are logically untenable, unreal and open ended. They do not yield to any attempt at rational interpretation. But they are sustained by the community's unshakeable belief in the stories and how they generate an understanding of the world. As Pinyar the widow says: "Faith is everything" (Dai,2006:35). However, the last story in this section opens up a further dimension. On the one hand the narrator tells us how the spirit of the place and its people "had this quality of absorbing visitors into a forgotten newness of things...a feeling of how things might have been"(Dai,2006:37); on the other, it tells us how the incursion of the migluns brought them face to face with change. Hoxo puts it succinctly when he says:

We saw a strange new glimmer in the distance. Our footsteps led us down unknown paths. We wanted more. Suddenly we knew more. There was more beyond our poor huts and cracked hearths where we once eased our dreams with murmured words and a good draft of home brew. (Dai: 43)

The changes were plenty. People who practiced animistic faith in community-oriented setups suddenly came face-to-face with the realities of Western modernity, the Christian religion and individualism as a way of existence. All that followed was inevitable.

In *the case of the travelling vessel*, the headman of Komsing recounts the story of a fabulous vessel called a danki which was owned by the 'Lotang' family of the 'Migu clan'. The vessel was cherished by family as an auspicious gift from the gods which was responsible for the good fortune of the clan. One day, the vessel was found split into two and this was followed by a decline in the fortune of the clan. The clan decided to perform an elaborate ritual and a miri was called from a neighbouring village. The miri decamped with a bag full of stolen coins and a number of heavy necklaces of precious stone. A maternal uncle of the Migu clan gave chase, and when he finally managed to locate two women to whom the miri had given the necklaces, he killed them in a fit of rage, and also killed an onlooker. After the incident, he did not return to his village. He married and settled down in 'Sirum' village of the 'Duyang group'. He returned back to his own village after fourteen years, but a link had been established between the Migu and the people of Sirum. All history, the headman concluded, was a history of connections:

There are many stories that link clans. Sometimes we forget how these connections were made, but everything is interconnected. Sometimes a connection is born in the middle of war. Sometimes it is through a woman, sometimes land, and sometimes it is through an object out of the past. (61)

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The other stories in the third section - *River woman, the scent of orange blossom* and *rites of love*- deal with story of Nenem and her daughter Losi. Nenem was a young girl of legendary beauty, a woman who could be as calm or as impulsive and unpredictable as the river. Her beauty attracts David, a young British officer posted in the region and soon, an enigmatic romance blossoms between the tribal girl and the miglun, an unheard-of occurrence in those days. However, when David is transferred to some other place and wants to take Nenem with him, she is unable to let go of her roots-her land and her people. She stays back: “No one dies of love. I loved him, and now I am enough on my own” (Dai, 2006:109). After some years, Nenem gets married to Kao and has a child, Losi. She comes to terms with the pangs of her aborted relationship and draws contentment from her present life. However, when she has to leave her village and settle in some other place when her village is destroyed in the flood following the earthquake, she cannot tolerate the pain and passes away. Nenem’s life and death epitomize the pangs of transition from one way of life to another. The last part is titled *A matter of time* and comprises five parts. It talks of how change has affected the individual and the community. The road becomes a symbol for encroachment into the pristine lands in the name of progress and development, a symbol of injury to the land.

The village had moved to its own quiet rhythm for centuries, with old certainties and beliefs, but the road was changing all that...The red gash turned in great loops and bends and plunged into the heart of the far mountains, trying to reach the scattered villages buried deep in the land of mist and wild chestnut.” (Dai, 2006:148)

The people did not know what to make out of the developments that were taking place in the name of progress. The old life was lost, and there was nothing tangible occurring yet:

The old days of war and valour had vanished. They had surrendered their lands to the government and now the road and the things that came with it seemed to be strangling them and threatening to steal their identity like a thief creeping into their villages and fields. (Dai,2006:157)

The four parts of the work trace the history of the evolution and growth of the region. The first part deals with the generation that existed before the colonizers came in. The second part outlines the coming of the colonizers and the changes that were occasioned due to this. The third part outlines the lives and experiences of the generation that grows up after the advent of the migluns, as their world opens up and they have access to education and professional opportunities. The last part outlines the effect of modernity on contemporary society. Standing face-to-face with the changes that have engulfed the traditional tribal societies, the author is apprehensive about what would happen next and that all these musings might lead nowhere. Rakut puts it succinctly when he says: “We are peripheral people. We are not politicians, scientists or builders of empires. Not even the well-known citizens or the outrageous one. Just peripheral people, thinking out our thoughts’(190).

The Legends of Pensam documents an indigenous community’s cultural beliefs and lifestyle and authentically portrays the rich oral tradition of the Adis, their myths and legends.

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Dai's book most importantly traces the impact of modernization on such a section of people and records the clash of tradition and modernity under the influence of the new world scenario. The tradition of the rich oral narratives makes the community's culture vibrant and Dai's effort in recording these stories for future generations is worthwhile. Dai's novel proves that North-East literature is definitely not limited to the projection of violence and terrorism, and instead is successful in portraying many underrepresented themes central to the lives of the Adi community in Arunachal Pradesh.

The novel explains how the far away land Arunachal Pradesh is also not able to escape from the influence of the modern world. The people staying there meet the change with anxiety and anticipation. The town of Pigo, the oldest settlement in the region has now become the first choice of the British officers in the area. The change that has taken place is that Pigo is the only town in the region with tarred roads, concrete buildings, electricity, and daily bazaars. The village has moved to its own quiet rhythm for centuries, with old certainties and beliefs, but the road is changing all the harmony of the people, because the things happening in the village are not even heard in their life ever. Their granary doors have been broken and all their precious beads and jewels have been stolen. It has happened at night. The thunderstruck victims cannot imagine how anyone could have done such a thing. Still, they believe that it would have been done by the spirits.

But the old generation people are not in a position to accept the modern amenities which they think are spoiling their traditions and beliefs. Earlier, the elders used to have 'Kebang'; the association like 'panchayat' where disputes are solved and is met with justice. They think that their days are gone. The depression of the old generation comes out as follows: The old days of war and valour had vanished. They had surrendered ancestral lands to the government and now the road and the things that came with it seemed to be strangling them and threatening to steal their identity like a thief creeping into their villages and fields. New fences mark old territory and it seems that a curtain has fallen over the old villages. The old sense of joy is being lost in the modern days. The modernity never allows the beliefs, spirits, myths, and supernatural things in the life of the village people. It teaches them dishonesty against their culture. The tribes are dubious about the so-called new brave world because it may spoil the goodness of the old generation. But they believe that the new generation will never give up their elders. The old people sit and think over the passage of their lives. They recollect the past and departed friends and engage in some philosophic thoughts. They are the humble and simple people who love to live peacefully in their huts.

The strict adherence to the traditional culture may hamper the educational development of the tribes on modern culture and they may be streamlined. In order to preserve their cultural identity, they may avoid their connection with the outside world. But, they don't realize that the world has become a global village. Detachment from the mainstream may affect the well-being of the tribes in all the way. Once Mona tells Mamang Dai that one of the famous film-makers wants to take a film based on the landscape and the life of the people of the Duyang

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and other villages. She says that it is a golden chance to expose the culture and tradition of their village to the world. Mamang Dai realizes that it is a wonderful chance to the land of elephants. She also recognizes the importance of recoding the dying oral culture and tradition for the benefit of future generation. Mona, the film-maker and Mamang Dai go around surveying the place and the busy rhythm of the life of the Adi tribe. As it is the festive time, the Adi tribe showcases their traditional talents on the stage. Mamang Dai thinks,

“It was important to record our stories. The old rhapsodists were a dying breed, and when they were gone, who would remember? What happens to the people and the places we forget? Where do they go? Hah, who knows about these things, I thought...The golden chance? Who gets it? Perhaps that is not even the question. It is simply about doing something, and getting the chance to make your own luck. (Dai: 176-179)

Conclusion

The novelist Mamang Dai is from the Adi tribe and she believes in their customs and traditions. Also, she believes in changes. She sees women succumbing to the new bright clothes, the delicate fabrics, the cosmetics, and herbal remedies. The old generation people are immersed in their culture and traditions. Suddenly, if anyone forces them to follow the new modern things, it is not possible for them. It may produce suffocation and sometimes it may lead to violence also. So, they should be allowed to follow their beliefs and rituals as they wish. To conclude, it is apt to mention the thoughts of Nenem about the life of a tribal. She says,

Nothing was complete. But there was comfort in looking at the green hills and the river that she had crossed to become Kao's wife. Together, they would raise a family, guard their land and live among their people observing the ancient customs of their clan. Surely these were enough gifts for one lifetime. (120)

Change is the one thing which cannot change. Change is inevitable. No one can stop the changes that happen in the world. Each and every step of human life is influenced by the change. The changes occur in the life of the tribal people also. But, they are not in a position to accept the changes as it is, because the changes force them to quit their culture and traditions. They want to preserve their culture and tradition. Mamang Dai's *The Legends of Pensam* facilitates to understand the tribal community and the lifestyle of the people who live in the lesser-known world. Apart from all the myths and beliefs, the old generation folk welcome the changes. They say,

Why should we be afraid of change? Change is a wonderful thing! It is a simple matter of rearrangement, a moment of great possibilities! Why should we be so afraid? We all want to be happy, but happiness eludes us as we keep thinking about it all the time. Sleepless nights. Sad, bereft mornings. Then suddenly, for no reason, the blood hums and a feeling of elation carries us through another day! This is how it has always been. We have nothing to fear. (Dai: 190-191).

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Mamang Dai acknowledges the changes happened in the Adi society. It is a form of evolving and it is better for the society. Changes are happening in the fields of religion, politics, socio-economic sphere and also in the lives of the tribal people. The mainstream people should help them to maintain good rapport between the modernity and the tradition. They should also help the tribals, who are not taking part in the race of modernity with reference to education, health, opportunities, employment, and empowerment for women. It is also important to help them to shed the feelings of insecurity. Otherwise, they can bring a rebellious reaction against change and return to pure indigenous old beliefs and traditions without knowing the taste of progress. It will be good if the benefits of change in modern societies can go along with the old generation's traditions without hurting the human values. Along with that, it is the duty of the government and the mainstream people to help them to live as dignified human beings.

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