

REPRESENTATION OF THE WORLD OF ADIS IN MAMANG DAI'S *THE LEGENDS OF PENSAM*

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Abstract

The “North East” is an umbrella term used for political convenience to group together eight Indian states that lie in the country’s Northeastern Region. North East India is an under-represented region in many ways. The troubled political climate, the beautiful landscapes and the confluence of various ethnic groups perhaps have given rise to a body of writing that is quite different from Indian English literature. So, the literature from North East India refers to literature in the languages of North East India and the body of work by English-language writers from this region. As a region with rich cultural and ethnolinguistic diversity, Northeast India’s literature is representative of varied histories, languages, socio-cultural and religious practices. With the distinct use of language, forms, cultural symbols and metaphors, Northeast literature articulates the unique experiences of conflict, beauty and culture in the Northeastern region. North East literature is concerned with psychological and social difficulties of the common people living in this region. This literature raises a great deal of issues like identity crisis, looking after roots, ecological problems, socio-political and cultural atmosphere. Mamang Dai’s *The Legends of Pensam* is a collection of nineteen stories that narrativizes the life-world of the Adis, one of the tribes of Arunachal Pradesh. The nineteen tales in *The Legends of Pensam* are an interconnected group of stories spelling out the ethos of the Adi tribal life and their belief system- their myths, legends, taboos and customs etc. This paper is an attempt to analyse the representation of customs and beliefs of Adis and their cherished traditional values as reflected in *The Legends of Pensam*. This paper also intends to explore the resistance of Adi people against various hegemonic forces to preserve their own ethnic identity.

Key words: North East, tribal, culture, myth, tradition, change.

INTRODUCTION

The term ‘North East’ has special connotation which binds together eight diverse, backward or underdeveloped states with regard to geographical, linguistic and ethnic ideas. These areas are ill-famed for their insecurity, violence, poverty, unemployment etc. It is one of the most under-represented regions of India. This stereotyped view of the region is also reflected in the literature in English from Northeast India. However, these issues are not the ultimate defining themes of the writings from this region. The rich cultural heritage of various ethnic groups, the beautiful natural landscape, and the troubled political atmosphere of the region have collectively contributed to the emergence of a kind of writing which is different from the mainland narratives in many ways. The writers of this region are deeply concerned with important contemporary issues like environmental degradation, climate change, deforestation, etc. Mamang Dai, a noted poet, journalist, and a former civil servant of Arunachal Pradesh beautifully depicts the myths, folktales, legends, history, ethnic life and the evolution of the Adis at present in her fiction *The Legends of Pensam* (2006).

Dai, being a true native of the land, brings in *The Legends of Pensam* her personal knowledge about the Adis of the Siang valley of Arunachal Pradesh. Through the stories in *The Legends of Pensam*, Dai vividly portrays the relation of the Adi tribe with the natural world with a respectful outlook towards their primitive customs, beliefs, and legends. Dai, in one of her interviews, published in *The Hindu*, declares that her prime intention behind writing this is to “protect and preserve the heritage and legacy of these tales.” She achieves this in *The Legends of Pensam* by merging the tradition and primitive customs with the history and myths of the community and by employing her unique narrative style. The novel contains nineteen stories, which are included in four sections titled “a diary of the world”, “songs of the rhapsodist”, “daughters of the village”, and “a matter of time” respectively. This work of fiction picturizes the evolving process of the Adis from their primitive society towards the modern one and shows how these people lament the loss of their tradition, ethnic life world, and simultaneously try hard to come up with the present deteriorating environment.

OBJECTIVES OF THE STUDY

The following objectives are framed for the study-

- To examine the traditional belief systems of the Adi tribe of Arunachal Pradesh.
- To analyse the effects and consequences of modernization of the traditional cultural belief systems of the Adi tribal people.

RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

The proposed study will be analytical in nature. It involves a very close reading of the primary text that leads to a detailed textural analysis of the text under study. In order to supplement the textural analysis, an examination and analysis of secondary texts will be necessary. The eco-critical theory will be adopted to interpret the text and this will provide a theoretical framework for the study.

DATA ANALYSIS

A) TRADITIONAL BELIEF SYSTEM OF ADI TRIBE:

The ‘Adi’ tribe is one of the ethnic sub-groups of the Tani people living in various districts of Arunachal Pradesh such as East Siang, West Siang, Upper Siang, Lower Dibang Valley, and Lohit Namsai. As Mamang Dai herself belongs to the Adi community, she has naturally the firsthand experiences of the age-old customs and the belief system of the Adis as well as their legends, myths, and fables. The society of the Adi community is primarily based on animism and supernatural belief. This belief system is deeply rooted in the ecology of the land, and in their belief system, the

‘shamans’ engage themselves in conversation with the spirits. The *Legends of Pensam* thus pictures the world of the Adis based on their co-existence with the natural and the supernatural worlds.

In the opening section, Mamang Dai talks about the meaning of ‘pensam’ in Adi language. She writes:

In our language, the language of the Adis, the word ‘pensam’ means ‘in between’. It suggests the middle, or middle ground, but it may also be interpreted as the hidden spaces of the heart where a secret garden grows. It is the small world where anything can happen and everything can be lived; where the narrow boat that we call life sails along somehow in calm or stormy weather; where the life of a man can be measured in the span of a song.

Both literally and figuratively, Pensam is the ‘in-between’ place between myth and reality, tradition and modernity “where anything can happen and everything can be lived.” The Adis live perfectly well in their sacred abode with their culture, rituals, customs, myths, belief system, which create a shield to save their environment from any outside influences. Dai, in *The Legends of Pensam*, attempts to show the collective consciousness and the shared memory of the Adi tribe through discovering their belief system, myths, and love for their land.

The Legends of Pensam by Mamang Dai, portrays the culture, superstitions and belief systems of the Adi tribe. The prologue of the book starts with the mention of a myth about the lady who competed with the gods to weave a tapestry. The book introduces the traditional belief systems of the Adis in a short line:

“In these small clearings in the middle of the forest, people have premonitions. Women dream dreams. Babies are born who grow up unnaturally fast, like deer or lion cubs. Infant mortality is high. Old women still braid threads of vine and pray for safe passage.” (Dai, 10)

One of the main characters of the book, Hoxo, is said to have fallen from the sky and was found by Lutor, the chief of the Ida clan and this superstition was not questioned by the village people. Another custom of Adi tribe is found in the story of “Pinyar, the widow”. Once her house caught fire, while she was in the field, it was Adi’s custom that when a house catch fire its owner is banished to observe certain taboo. The owners of burnt houses are banished for fear of provoking the tiger spirit that causes fires and have to observe a certain period of taboo where no one could visit or eat with them.

The belief of Adis in spirits, malevolent and benevolent and the rites and rituals to propitiate them are significant. The spirits may appear in different forms and their appearances evoke fear and panic among the members of the tribe and they believe something bad like murder, or death may occur if they are angered. Such is the story of Biribik, the water serpent. The premonition of the death of Lutor, when he saw Biribik, the water serpent with ancient eyes and a head with horns and the small fish found in the pocket of Lutor when he died was also considered as the spirit manifestation also points to the beliefs of the tribe. The narrator tells everyone knows the story of Biribik, the water serpent, as it is fixed in their collective memory. The sudden death of Kalen in a hunting accident is also attributed to the spirits. Making the spirit angry is ominous as they may bring misfortune to the community. The story of miserable plight of bed ridden Kepi is also attributed to the evil spirits. Rituals were performed by Shamans to cure the sick and the parents of Kepi were advised to perform a special ceremony in case the spirit of a snake had coiled around his body. They had to perform the serpent ritual, chanting and negotiating with the spirits, calling them to heal the sick child but the spirits had moved away to a place beyond recall. “They are the most dangerous ones, the ones who go away and never return” (Dai, 24)

Pinyar, the widow whose house burnt down recounts a myth about the race of supernatural beings called the miti-mili, who makes the mysterious yeast named si-ye. The si-ye is believed to have supernatural powers and was forbidden before a hunt or a journey since it made men hallucinate. Pinyar claims that some households sometimes forget to observe the rules leading to men dying in the forests and of how the si-ye was sprinkled on the eyelids of those who die an unnatural death to ensure that their spirits would not return on a restless search. Kamur who murdered his own daughter was believed to have been possessed by an evil spirit for his parents' and grandparents' failing to observe certain rites in the past and a priest was called to exorcise the bad spirits.

Though the people lead a life close to the nature, their belief in the spirits' envy and jealousy makes them fearful of the nature. For example, the aubergine plant which grew to the size of a tree and avoided by the people since no one dared to cut it down nor could recall planting. Even they are afraid of their annual journey to the snow-mountains to harvest a precious root, the deadly aconitum that is collected for the preparation of poison arrow. When affected by the evil spirits, it becomes mandatory for them to call the shaman to do necessary rituals to save the people from the spirits.

In *The Legends of Pensam*, Mamang Dai also talks about the lifestyle of Adis, their indigenous farming systems:

In our villages, the ‘fields’ are patchy clearings that dot the thickly wooded hillsides far from our homes. Every household has plots here for growing vegetables and herbs. These are the open workplaces that their owners grow so accustomed to that they set off from home very early to work all morning, weeding, clearing and planting. They carry their food with them, and when the sun is high overhead, they shelter in small thatch shacks and eat their midday meal and stretch out by the fire, sipping black tea. This outdoor life in the clear and silent space of the high valleys is addictive, and some villagers often spend the night in their solitary shacks. The others, who leave, pile all the days pickings of green chillies, pumpkins, yam and ginger into their baskets before setting off on the long trek back to their village. (Dai, 27)

Thus, the traditional belief system, the culture of Adi tribal people is related to nature which revolves around their daily life.

B) EFFECTS OF MODERNIZATION OF THE TRADITIONAL BELIEF SYSTEM OF THE ADI TRIBE:

Arunachal Pradesh is a place famous for its biodiversity hotspots with wide range of flora and fauna. The Adis, one of the communities of Arunachal Pradesh live in complete sync with nature. They practice the traditional way of living depending solely on nature and without hampering the ecological balance of the region. But the post-independent scenario of the land has undergone drastic changes- both environmental and socio-political. This changed scenario of the region has caught the attention of Dai’s fiction, and in *The Legends of Pensam*, she rightly highlights the troubles that the Adis in this region are facing while trying to remodel their lives for existence against all the odds.

The impact of globalization, consumerism, and urbanization upon primitive life and the sacred abode of the Adis is a massive one. Historical and political incidents like the coming of the ‘Bee-ree-tiss’ (British) or the ‘Migluns’ and the Second World War ruptured the social and ecological fabric of the Adis. Dai, in her fiction, records the entrance of the British in the region with the construction of the famous ‘Stilwell Road’ around the beginning of the 1800 A.D. It was during this time that the Adis came in direct contact with the ‘Bee-ree-tiss’ as labourer of the construction of the famous ‘Stilwell Road’ which runs through the Siang valley, the center of the earth. The first brush of modernity touches the land and prepares the future roads for further development. Dai describes this as:

But it wasn't as if change hadn't touched our land, or had come only recently. The first white priests, surveyors and soldiers had begun arriving in the region almost hundred years ago, in the early 1800s. Since then, people from other worlds had come and gone, though the only records of their journeys are the stories that the older men and women remember. (Dai, 37-38)

The story "Rites of Love" tells the story of Nenem, beautiful and agile, the mythical daughter of the river woman could not survive and gave up without a struggle when the great earthquake of 1950 changed the lives and the landscape of her beloved land forever. "It was a fearful time, and it was a sad time" (Dai, 127). The river was thrown off its course and it demolished every sign and symbol of the past years that Nenem nurtured in her heart. Most importantly, all the houses and the tree-lined avenues of the miglun quarters were gone forever with the violent waters and with them all memories of her first love, the young British officer, David. Her husband, Kao put a chain on the tin trunk and tied it to the thick wooden post so that it would not slip away-the tin trunk that Nenem had brought from her home at her marriage and contained her memories of her maiden life. This tin trunk holding untold stories were later carried away to her new home after marriage by Nenem's daughter, Losi along with her other bridal gifts. The earthquake can be considered as a symbol of the incipient modernity which brings in a tumult in the native life.

While the first section is filled with the description of the lush green Siang valley of Arunachal Pradesh, the concluding section titled "a matter of time" stands in stark contrast with such plenty. This section documents the change that swept the green valley in the form of progress and 'development' in post-independent India. Like other parts of India, the scenario of this region changes rapidly after independence. The tribal belts of Arunachal Pradesh also become a part of the developmental projects of the newly formed Government. After independence, the Government's approach to the tribals changed drastically. Earlier it was decided to maintain a 'status quo' and 'isolation policy' for the tribals of India. But this approach was firmly replaced by a 'policy of development, progress, and integration.

Adis had already experienced the touch of the outside world first through the hands of the British during the construction of the road and later through the infrastructural projects of the Government of India. As a consequence, in the present scenario, business and tourism expand in and around the land of the Adis. The calm and secured abode of the Adis, their green valley, the forest, etc., got permanently thwarted in the face of the changes which followed the land. The greenery of the region gradually transforms into small towns, offices, schools, hotels, and tourist

spots. The green topography of Siang valley turned into dust and debris. Dai portrays this deplorable condition of the green valley through the terrible description of Gurdum town:

The town was permanently awash in debris. Plastic floated across the hills, clung to riverbanks, perched on tress. Broken glass and discarded packaging scarred the bald slopes closest to the town. Workmen sucked on wet bidis and chipped away at the mountainside. Their women stood by and looked askance with dark, savage eyes. (Dai, 164)

Mamang Dai shows not only the various changes in the environment but also the collapse of their moral values. The entire final section of *The Legends of Pensam* records all these changes and divulges the disturbing reality and the painful condition of the Adis. Undoubtedly, it was very difficult for the Adis to abstain themselves from the temptations of modern life. Thus, this sense of dualism leads them into a dilemmatic situation, eventually leading them into a search for identity and roots.

CONCLUSION

Mamang Dai's *The Legends of Pensam* can be regarded as a saga of the progression of changes. Dai delineates a place which is under the grip of an incipient modernity and is gradually losing its older values. Resultantly, the people intensely long for a definite identity by clinging to their very sense of belongingness is thwarted. A sense of dualism can be engendered by change or modernity. It is not possible for a subject to maintain one single identity, native or foreign. The nature of assimilating encounter creates a sense of living in two worlds at once. The crisis ensues when a subject has to negotiate this duality. They are compelled to suffer both from the irresistible forces of the outside modern world and from the expectations of their traditional customs and beliefs. Tradition matters to the Adi characters depicted in Mamang Dai's *The Legends of Pensam*. Their traditions are a source of strength for them than being obstacles. Dai beautifully portrays her characters as having great respect for their traditions and this tactic enables Dai to highlight the Adi traditions which are threatened by modernity. The time of changes appeared like confused and haunted for the Adi tribal people. The Adi people accustomed to their own patterns of life set by them looked at the signs of changes which they thought are going to disrupt their continuity and integrity with doubt and fear. The villagers did not have a clear-cut idea of what was happening but they couldn't remain indifferent to the present scenario. A quest for identity is evident in the text through the character of narrator. The tribal people negotiate between the past and the present through their memories. The tribal people are heavily attached to their traditions that they are unable to leave behind the past. They attempt to access the present in terms of their traditional past.

They document the present changes and modify this documentation according to their own versions and store these in their granary of stories and legends. They negotiate with the changes by preserving them in their memories rather than accepting the changes as something practically happening with their own lives.

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