

Subaltern Voices and Cultural Memory in Mammang Dai's "The Legend of Pensam"

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Abstract:

This paper interprets The Legend of Pensam, a novel written by Mammang Dai which seamlessly incorporates the folktales, values and history with modern life of the Adi tribe of Arunachal Pradesh. The work aims at recollecting memories of the past and incorporating them in today's era. The concept of "Pensam" portrays Adi people's love for both the soul and the body while also portraying the material realm. Through this concept of Pensam, which in Adi language means in-between, which portrays a life with lingering equilibrium between living and spiritual, the author explains the intertwined existence of tangible and intangible in Adi culture. The Research paper will describe the consequences of national politics and globalization while attempting to protect the native culture. Highly involving storytelling from Dai, where we can see tribal and modern identities as well as the power of the oral book, which are all interwoven in the narrative. Finally, the paper attempts to add on to the ongoing discussions in relation to indigenous Indian literature. The text initiates with the protagonist pondering over her identity and the interference of modernity to their life. The analysis explores Dai's captivating narrative and culture, which allows people to supplement the fragmented story of a tribe and the relevance of oral tradition to understand the diverse tribal identity. The breathtaking fusion of myth and history into Dai's plots is also eloquently described. Further, the study contrasts between the various social and political changes and the globalization that would result in the alteration of the indigenous culture to some degree and studies in detail how the novel redresses this concern.

Keywords: Subaltern voices, cultural memory, indigenous identity, Arunachal Pradesh, oral traditions, storytelling, Adi tribe, myths and legends, The Legend of Pensam.

Introduction

Mammang Dai, who was born on February 23rd, 1957, in Pasighat, is known for her nature-inspired writings, which she attributes to her upbringing. She was born in Arunachal Pradesh, a north-eastern state of India. Adi is her native language. She had chosen her career in journalism over a Civil Service job and also worked as a volunteer in the World Wildlife Fund's Eastern Himalaya Biodiversity Hotspots initiative which help her to come close with the tribes. She has served as a correspondent for a number of daily publications, including Hindustan Times, The Telegraph, and Sentinel. She served as the Project Officer for the WWF's Arunachal Pradesh Biodiversity Hotspots Conservation Program. Dai, who received the 2011 Padmashree for Literature and Education, has also held numerous affiliations with the North East Writers' Forum, Sahitya and Sangeet Natak Akademi, the Raja Ram

Mohun Roy Library Foundation, and the Arunachal Pradesh Literary Society. Nonetheless, Dai is mostly recognized as a historian and creative writer who focuses on Arunachal Pradesh.

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Tribal literature especially through the oral tradition has been used as a record of the histories, struggles, and identities of indigenous people. However, with the written traditions, these elaborate oral epics have been dominated by written literary genres that are more sympathetic to the urban and upper caste and the elites (Devy, 2002). The purpose of this research paper is to examine how tribal communities are portrayed in the novel of and Mamang Dai with special reference to suffering, resistance, and self-assertion. The author has portrayed the sufferings and the cultural essence of the tribal people and have introduced the tribal voices in mainstream Indian literature. The novel encompasses themes of oppression, labor, ethnicity, and rebellion and offer a voice to the marginalized. Through this work, this study will examine how tribal experiences are represented and the consequences of such representations for the study of subalternity in India (Sarkar, 2014).

Tribes in India have a rich literary history that has been preserved in oral history, which is folklore, myths, and songs. Therefore, oral traditions are an important means of passing down tribal history, culture, and tribal identity. These forms of storytelling have for a long time been the only way through which information can be passed and order maintained in tribal societies. Oral traditions also act as a channel whereby the tribal people demonstrate their defiance of domination by other superior groups and assert their cultural independence in the face of growing subjugation (Béteille, 1998). Nevertheless, the insight into the significance of oral traditions has been sidelined in recognition of the precondition of written texts which are hegemonic in mainstream Indian literature. Such authors as Mamang Dai have tried to close the gap by weaving features of oral narratives into their written productions. In her novel, *The Legends of Pensam*, Dai entangles original tribal stories into the frame of the novel to preserve the narrative heritage of the Adi tribe while also sending out these narratives into the worldwide literary sphere. Such a combination of oral and written means of passing knowledge enables us to maintain the tribal history, at the same time placing it into the context of modern literature (Dai, 2006).

Mamang Dai's *The Legends of Pensam*, is a book with a significant environmental focus. As a book, Arunachal Pradesh's unique environment is shown via a mixture of history, myth, legends, traditions, memories, and fiction. Taking an ecological perspective, it is possible to examine how colonialism impacted traditional values while simultaneously causing environmental damage and degrading the land. "Since the Abor expedition of 1912 after the Komsing incident, the whole of the Siang valley had been opened up for exploration and the numerous villages of the frontier hills had been brought under British administrative control." This historical reference highlights the onset of colonialism, which disrupted traditional ways of life and led to environmental and cultural transformations. In today's world of globalization and modernity, the book urges a return to the age-old relationship between man and the environment by restoring that community's cultural identity. People were not only displaced but their epistemologies were also destroyed by colonization. This understanding is the foundation of the decolonization effort. Displaced people's epistemic situations will be restored as one of its key objectives. Colonial rule and administration in Northeast India have resulted not just in a

culture of impunity and separatist violence, but also in the reductive homogeneous conception of Northeast India as conflict-plagued. The multi-ethnic and multi-cultural fabric of the Northeast boundaries is being highlighted as a developing post-colonial geopolitical imagination in the contemporary era. Using as a narrative regime, Mamang Dai reclaims the Adi community's epistemic agency and human right to cultural self-determination. Her works focus on aspects of cultural creation, presenting the heroes who are torn between traditions and the desire to be a part of the contemporary world. In *The Legends of Pensam*, Dai gives the idea about the Adi tribe of Arunachal Pradesh, who have difficulty preserving their tradition, culture, and their identity due to globalization and lack of economic optimization. The cultural recombination shown by the author Dai is the dilemma of selecting between the old customs that played an essential role in everybody's life and the new opportunities of civilization which are to be found to be good or bad. Young people of the Adi tribe are presented as hoping for education and civilization, but at the same time are endowed with respect for nature and their traditions. Dai also asserts that knowledge and understanding of the topography of Adi country and the sacredness of the land is an enduring feature even when the people and or groups interact with the "new" world. This clash between the old and the new is embodied in the character's interaction with the forest as a territory that is both practical and otherworldly, which defines the culture of the people (Dai, 2006). Dai's representation of cultural creolization is a universal experience of indigenous peoples in the contemporary world. Today, indigenous people in many regions of the globe are trying to combine the concepts of new technologies, education, and business with the principles of traditional wisdom and tribal customs. During globalization, hybrid cultural still help the indigenous communities to have cultural continuity when conforming to the new global culture. In the study of cultural creolization, Dai demonstrates that Indigenous people can become modern without ceasing to be Indigenous. Thus, indigenous peoples can establish new forms of identity, using traditional and contemporary practices, to become part of the contemporary world while preserving their culture.

Pollution is a universal problem that affects indigenous and tribal people most of whom are dependent on natural resources for their food, shelter, medicines, and other basic needs. In most regions of the globe, indigenous peoples' territories are endowed with natural resources and, hence, become easy targets for colonization by outside forces, including governments and companies. In 'legends of Pensam' Dai examines the challenges faced by Adi community highlighting the effects of pollution on both the ecosystem and the social structure. An academic analysis states: "This 'pollution' is not only harming the ecological balances of the land but also deteriorating the social, ethical, and moral fabric of the Adi."

This observation underscores the intertwined nature of environmental degradation and cultural erosion, emphasizing the need to address pollution to preserve both the natural world and the community's heritage.

Dai also underlines the role of the indigenous ecological knowledge which is the knowledge of the indigenous people, and which is the knowledge that has been inherited by the Adi tribe. Some of the techniques that the Adi people use in agriculture include shifting cultivation that makes use of the rhythms of the earth to farm crops without compromising soil productivity. They also have strong beliefs in the spirits, and most of their activities are carried out with the backing of the spirits of rivers,

mountains, and forests (Dai, 2006). In *The Legends of Pensam*, the civilization, and development of Road construction, therefore, pose the main danger of undermining the ecology of the Adi people's civilization acquired after centuries. This not only threatens the immediate physical extermination of the tribe but also threatens their cultural and religious relationship with the land (Dai, 2006). The conflict between the Adi tribe and nature that Dai presents is a universal problem of indigenous peoples all over the world who suffer from the consequences of industrialization and globalization first. The content of her work includes indigenous people's ecological knowledge relevant to managing resources, useful for understanding the modern problems of climate and degradation of the environment (Dai, 2006).

Likewise in *The Legends of Pensam*, Dai portrays the sustainable interaction of the Adi tribe with their environment because of their religious bond with the earth. The ability of the Adi people to understand the forest and its resources, and the ability of the Adi people to use the resources in a sustainable manner that will not harm the forest is a clear indication of the value of Indigenous management practices in the sustainable environment (Dai, 2006). Through Dai's representation of the Adi tribe's ability to live in harmony with the environment, it is possible to understand the importance of indigenous knowledge in the current global issues of deforestation and climate change. Indigenous people's knowledge about the environment is now valued by the global environmental activism that seeks to defend indigenous territories and include indigenous knowledge in environmental management. Traditional knowledge, including agroforestry, community forestry, and water harvesting, has useful insights for the current approaches to mitigation of environmental degradation and promotion of sustainability (Martínez-Alier, 2002). Thus, global environmental movements try to preserve and develop indigenous ecological knowledge to protect those ecosystems that are important for indigenous peoples and the global environment.

Dai's Celebration of Tribal Resilience and Survival Through Storytelling

Literature has always been a way by which oppressed groups can speak out, regain control, and resist hegemonic discourses. The experiences of tribal resistance depicted in these fictions are not only mere fiction; they are the products of literary Indigenous resistance whose purpose is to amplify the voices of Indigenous people and respond to racism. To this end, Mamang Dai's works such as *the Legends of Pensam* do present hope and survival of the tribes amid the modernity onslaught. Unlike other occurrences of rebellion that depict Dai as a presentation of resistance, they view how these tribal communities decline to change but powerfully alter depending on the circumstances and stay true to their culture and land. In *The Legends of Pensam*, the act of storytelling is interpreted as a means of activism, and that is because it offers people of the Adi tribe an important syncretism of history, culture, and philosophy in their battle against modernization and globalization (Dai, 2006, p. 60). Dai's characters fight back by maintaining their spirituality and culture, and, through the stories they tell, pass on the knowledge that will help their community to survive. The tribal culture of the Adi people is illustrated as something, which makes them strong and gives hope to find a way to live a modern life and not lose contact with their roots. On this account, storytelling can be understood as both a cultural practice and a form of resistance because it helps the Adi people to stay beings with their agency and fend off those forces that would seek to domesticate them (Dai, 2006). This element of tribal survival also runs in parallel with Dai's representation of land and the natural environment as

the key resource within which indigenous populations must sustain themselves. As embracing nature is one of the outstanding features of the Adi culture, understanding nature is depicted as a source of strength and continuity which helps the people to resist environmental and societal transformation. Thus, demonstrating that the Adi people are still able to live in tune with nature and remain survivors of the circumstances they encounter (Dai, 2006).

It is important to know that storytelling is one of the major elements in *The Legends of Pensam*: it helps grow the sense of tribal peculiarity and cultural heritage and serves as a weapon against the encroaching forces that aim to destroy it. For the Adi people, an oral history is much more than just a historical account; it is a culture for they believe that the living can communicate with their forebears through such narratives. Using storytelling as one of the main plot devices, Dai emphasizes that telling stories is the way to culturally replenish and regain the ability to construct a positive future. In *Legends of Pensam*, oral practices of the Adi are depicted as evolving processes that are vibrant yet connected to the tradition of the tribe. The characters in the novel continuously practice narration as a coping mechanism for contingencies of modernity. These stories are therefore not fossilized but continue to undergo each form of hermeneutics to fit the needs of the present. According to Dai, there seems to be resistance to integrating the global world probably to retain their original cultural practices and identity as the Adi people (Dai, 2006). The oral traditions in the novel are the storehouse of tribal knowledge and experience and include the history, culture, and wisdom of the Adi people. The Adi people use stories to teach their children how the world was created, how one should treat the land, and how to live a balanced life with the land. This knowledge is so crucial for tribal people as it provides them with a potential weapon that they need to protect themselves from the further destructive influence of modernity (Dai, 2006, p.324). Storytelling also serves as a form of resistance against cultural assimilation and erasure. As Chakravarty (2016) notes, one of the key challenges faced by tribal communities in the modern world is the pressure to assimilate into mainstream society, often at the cost of losing their cultural identity. As a victim of villagers' pressure to be a master warrior, Dai, in *The Legends of Pensam* utilizes storytelling as a way of combating this notion. By downplaying collecting and promoting the continuity of oral narratives, she implicitly argues that storytelling may be a means for countering a standardizing culture of the contemporary West. These stories comprise more than historiography; their narratives belong very much to the present and indeed a future envisioned by the Adi people. The role of an objective narrator in *The Legends of Pensam* is important and further emphasizes this use of storytelling because it is a collective culture. They are not recounted by a single individual but are narrated and passed around within the community to help the members of that tribe develop a memory. This collective memory acts as a protection against the processes of individualization that are so characteristic of modernity, and which attempt to dismantle social bonds in favor of more asocial forms of being. This way the Adi people can tell the stories of their people and hence continue to feel they are part of a community and have continuity despite the change that is happening around them (Dai, 2006). Dai also relates to a common indigenous experience of the obsession with the loss of storytelling as a way of countering globalization and mainstream assimilation. According to King (2003), storytelling is an important way for Indigenous people to retain their identity and refuse to be erased from their communities' histories. In *The Legends of Pensam*, storytelling is not simply a reflection of past narratives; it is a manner by which the Adi people

can envision a future in which they can come into existence in all their linguistically and culturally preserved splendor.

Mamang Dai's *The Legends of Pensam* is a more philosophical reason invoking telling of similar feelings of alienation. In 'All the Freedom We've Got,' Dai writing about one of the Adi tribes of Arunachal Pradesh, captures the social and religious alienation that the tribe endures when it is grappling with the forces of modernity and globalization. The Adi people are not completely denied the privileges of modernity, but they are alienated when they are included in the circle of modern society. According to *The Legends of Pensam*, Dai managed to express the conflict between tradition and progress. It moves from showing the younger generation of the Adi tribe as interested in education, urbanization, and employment while the elders are seen to be struggling with their relationship with the land, spiritually and culturally (Dai 2006). This generational divide is the dichotomy between inclusion and exclusion and although the Adi people are included in the modern world they are excluded from the cultural and spiritual world which they once lived in. The concept of alienation that Dai describes is not only confined to the loss of certain cultural practices but indeed extends much further than that. It also includes the pollution associated with the process of development. The Adi people are very much in touch with their environment and their traditional way of life is under pressure from development initiatives such as road construction and logging. These projects unbalance the environment that the Adi people have sustained for generations and cause a feeling of displacement and dislocation. In this regard, I found that there is an environmental aspect of marginalization because tribal people are often left out of the processes by which their territories and resources are decided upon (Dai, 2006, p.63).

Mamang Dai: The Symbiotic Relationship Between Past and Future

Mamang Dai's *The Legends of Pensam* also unveils the ways, by which the traditional past helps to face the difficulties of modernity with the help of a chosen path. The text explores the nature of the Adi tribe and the capacity of the community members to live in Sync with the environment represents an important factor of tribal identity. Also built upon this structure, Dai believes that the Adi people still can hold out against the pressures brought by any form of development projects by embracing themselves to the natural reserves and respecting what their ancestors have left behind them. Thus, the civilizational prospects that Dai sketches correspond to the social amnesia that requires indigenous people to change but not forget that they are savages (Dai, 2006). In the same vein, in Mamang Dai's *The Legends of Pensam*, the theme of history and its relationship with the future in the context of the environment is depicted. In asserting the intellectual and environmental authority of the Adi tribe, Dai positions their survival as a matter of how they incorporate eco-cultural memory into sustainable development. The past in this context is a model of how people can live sustainably, and some lessons can be learned by the Adi people and other international environmental movements concerned with sustainability and climate change (Dai, 2006). The Arunachal Pradesh-born writer, Mamang Dai, portrays the past and the future in her works, especially in *The Legends of Pensam*. Through the depiction of Dai's experiences, there is a focus on a tripartite interconnection between history and culture as well as the eco-system; the indigenous people of the region especially the Adi tribe are people of the land, who harmonize with nature. In this way, Dai provides a model of the past interwoven with the present in which cultural and ecological knowledge is vital for the construction of

tribal societies' futures. This ideology is reflected in her proposals for using storytelling as a form of revitalization of the First Nations' culture and to question the process of assimilation brought by modernity. Lastly, Dai dreams of a society that is premised on the principles that have formed the antithetical impetus to industrialization and modernization.

Cultural and Environmental Continuity in *The Legends of Pensam*

In *The Legends of Pensam*, Mamang Dai uses the historical and the contemporary to show how culture and environment influence the Adi people. Dai who exposed the way the Adi people relate to land showed the close correlation between culture and ecology. By so doing, she gives the notion that the only way through which the Adi tribe and other indigenous people can survive is by balancing between the two; culture and environment which have been inherited. Dai's story is because the Adi people are in harmony with nature. The very title *The Legends of Pensam* alludes to a legendary country where histories and recollections of events, people, and places exist and entwine between the real and the otherworldly time dimensions. Pensam, which can be translated as 'the in-between', represents the area of the historical, the mnemonic, and the natural. This 'in-between' is the key concept of Dai's concept of culture and environmental sustainability. The people of the Adi group, as it will be shown throughout the paper, embody this balance through their rituals, customs, and domestic practices, as they are a part of the culture that is intrinsically tied to the geography of where they live (Dai, 2006). In this regard, Dai has provided one of the ways of depicting the relationship between traditional ecological practices and the Adi people's way of life. The tribe's agricultural practices for instance are grounded on the understanding of the terrain, the time of the year, and the surrounding environment. Such practices are not only material but also filled with essential spiritual meaning to imply that the country is alive and needs to be treated as such. In this respect, land is not only a mere means of existence but also an essential part of the tribe's heritage. The concept of land helps the Adi people protect themselves against the challenging forces of modernity and maintain their identity (Dai, 2006). Dai also speaks of the need to maintain the people's knowledge of the environment as part of culture. In the novel, she illustrates how the Adi people have transmitted knowledge of plants, animals, and the cycles of the environment from one generation to the other. This kind of passing down of ecological knowledge is important in sustaining the balance of the tribe with the rest of the environment. It also acts as a form of defiance to the ever-increasing modern development projects that seek to upset this balance. Through depicting the peculiarities of the Adi tribe's attitudes to the environment, Dai singles out indigenous knowledge as the only key to addressing the problems of deforestation and deculturation, and thus, contributes to establishing the sustainable indigenous model (Dai, 2006). The portrayal of an environment that does not change over time mirrors the other Indigenous literature in which concern between land and people is also. However, continuing with Moreton-Robinson's thoughts, Indigenous peoples' connection with the land is not based on financial gain, but on an identity. In *The Legends of Pensam*, Dai gives more meaning to this by capturing how the relationship of the Adi tribe to the land defines their existence. One passage reflects on the enduring presence of nature amidst the fading traditions: "The river cuts through our land as before in its long journey to the sea. In spring the red flowers still blaze against our sky. But the old people now, the few of them alive, turn slowly in their sleep as the fires burn down to a heap of ash." (Dai, 2006) This imagery juxtaposes the timeless beauty of the landscape with the decline of ancestral customs, suggesting a loss of cultural

vitality. The land is not only the territory or the ground that the people occupy but also the place where memory and history are stored; the land ensures that the Adi people do not lose their identity despite the pressures exerted on them.

This is why the complete textual analysis of Mamang Dai's *The Legends of Pensam* provides readers with a vision of the future based on the regeneration of the native's ecological knowledge and pre-colonial material culture. Instead of promoting the adoption of industrialized models of sustainability, Dai offers an indigenous approach to sustainable development based on the Adi people's knowledge of the environment. This model is an understanding of how the land requires respect and that one must not disturb the equilibrium existing between man and his environment. Dai's representation of Abor's original inhabitants' struggle against modernization is broader issues of indigenous people and environmental conservation globally. Surprisingly, many of her works fall within the specifications of the environmental justice movement which focuses on the preservation of indigenous territories and epistemologies from the ravages of modernization and neoliberal globalization. The Adi people are also known for their sustainable form of farming, and their responsible use of natural resources available to them (Dai, 2006). The theme of indigenous people's future, especially the Adi people, and the future of other indigenous people of the world is another major theme in *The Legends of Pensam*. This knowledge is not only protection for oneself, but it is protection for generations to come and for the world as one values his or her life, and those around them, and the world in which they live. Dai's view of the future is that the practices she is working to preserve are not quaint or primitive, but necessary to build a world that is both sustainable and fair (Dai, 2006).

Dai also demonstrates how the Adi people can protect their sovereignty as they fight for environmental conservation. Ecofeminism is yet again the underlying message of the novel, as the indigenous people should be allowed to protect their lands and indigenous cultures, as this is the only way to overcome the crises one day. In this way, the Adi people maintain their cultural heritage and do not allow various globalization processes that seek to capitalize on their land to harm the environment (Sawyer & Gomez, 2012). This vision of the future is especially significant considering current discussions on development and environmental equity. In many parts of the world, Indigenous people are at the forefront of the fight against the destruction of their environment through such activities as mining, logging, and other related activities. Dai's work captures this reality of the world by pointing out that the existence of tribal people is tied to the existence of the environment. The book's portrayal of the Adi people and their struggle against modernization brings out effectively the industrial models that ignore sustainable development of the greed for more industrial development (Dai, 2006). *The Legends of Pensam* by Mamang Dai is a deep reflection of the continuity between the past and the future in terms of the cultural and environmental identity of the Adi people. Looking at her focus on narratives, Dai shows how the efforts to restore the verbal histories and the sheer ecological values yield an important weapon against the tendencies of modernization and the disappearance of the tribal peoples. She has a hope for the future which is based on sustainable conservative utilization of natural resources and local knowledge and can be seen as a gendered model of counter-globalization or anti-industrialization.

conclusion

In addressing the issues of the Adi people, Dai has also put forward messages that apply to the global society, such as indigenous people's rights, environmental protection, and cultural heritage. In this respect, *The Legends of Pensam* is a powerful message that the Adi tribe, like many other tribal communities, can only survive if the world learns to respect the balance between the forces of modernization and the forces of nature.

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