

Decolonizing History through Oral Narratives in the Selected Fiction of Mamang Dai

Sudhan. S. S¹

Ph. D Research Scholar, Department of English, Chikkaiah Government Arts and Science College, Erode-4.

Dr. S. Sureshkumar²

Assistant Professor of English, Chikkaiah Government Arts and Science College, Erode-4.

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Abstract

This article examines how Mamang Dai employs oral narratives as a decolonial methodology of counter-archiving in her novels *The Legends of Pensam* and *The Black Hill*. Moving beyond prevailing ecocritical and mythological readings, this study argues that Dai utilizes Adi and Mishmi oral storytelling not as passive folklore, but as an alternative historiography. Drawing on Walter Dignolo's decolonial theory and Jan Vansina's framework on oral tradition, the analysis demonstrates how Dai's fiction destabilizes colonial archival authority, restores indigenous historical agency, and reclaims collective memory against linear Western historical paradigms, ultimately reframing oral literature as a sovereign site of historical recovery.

Keywords: Decoloniality, Oral Historiography, Indigenous Epistemology, Counter-Archive.

Introduction:

Decolonizing Colonial Histories through Storytelling. Imperial expansion relies not only on physical conquest but also on textual control. Colonial archives comprising administrative reports, gazetteers, surveying maps, and missionary journals functioned as authoritative technologies of rule that codified indigenous populations through a lens of primitive alterity. In *The Black Hill*, set against the backdrop of nineteenth-century Anglo-tribal conflicts in the northeastern frontier,

Mamang Dai directly engages with this archival dominance. Rather than accepting imperial records as objective historical truth, Dai constructs a counter-history that juxtaposes official colonial documentation with the lived experiences and oral accounts of the Mishmi and Abor (Adi) peoples.

A central historical event in *The Black Hill* is the journey and subsequent murder of the French Jesuit missionary Father Nicolas Krick, an event well-documented in French evangelical records and British colonial reports. Imperial archives historically framed Krick as a noble martyr bringing Christian civilization to a wild, lawless frontier, while portraying the Mishmi chief Kajinsha as an unprovoked, treacherous murderer. Dai destabilizes this imperial narrative by excavating the political, territorial, and economic motivations behind indigenous resistance. Through her narrative, Father Krick's journals which represent the written European archive are brought into direct friction with the unwritten oral motives of the native tribes.

In his published travelogue, Father Krick records his observations of the frontier tribes with a mixture of ethnographic curiosity and imperial condescension. However, Dai complicates this colonial gaze by granting narrative interiority to both Krick and Kajinsha. Dai illustrates how Krick's very presence accompanied by British officers, survey equipment, and maps was perceived by tribal elders not as an innocent spiritual mission, but as an existential threat to tribal sovereignty:

The white men came with paper and pens, measuring the trees, the rivers, and the lines of our hills. They wrote names on places that already had names, names given by our ancestors when the world was young. To them, if a thing was not written in their books, it did not exist. But our elders knew that behind the paper came the guns, behind the survey came the road, and behind the road came the end of our freedom. (Dai 210)

This extended block quotation highlights the operational mechanics of imperial cartography and textuality. The act of writing down names and mapping territories is recognized as a precursor to territorial displacement. By documenting the elders' oral reflections, Dai demonstrates that tribal resistance to foreign intrusion was a rational defense of indigenous sovereignty rather than random savagery.

Furthermore, Dai uses storytelling to deconstruct the imperial court proceedings that led to Kajinsha's execution by British forces in Dibrugarh. In colonial historiography, Kajinsha's trial and conviction stand as a closed, legalistic proof of his guilt. Yet, Dai's narrative reveals the systemic illegitimacy of a trial

conducted in an alien language, governed by foreign laws, and reliant on biased colonial interpreters. In *The Black Hill*, Dai highlights Kajinsha's profound isolation within the colonial judicial system through a running quotation: "They spoke of laws and boundaries, of treaties signed in distant cities by men who had never seen our hills, treating our lives as entries in a ledger" (Dai 275).

To counter this ledger-based history, Dai presents the oral memory preserved by the Mishmi community. While British records reduce Kajinsha to a executed convict, Mishmi oral tradition remembers him as a protector of tribal trade routes and territorial autonomy. As Linda Tuhiwai Smith notes, "reclaiming a history is a process of reporting injustice, analyzing localized structures of power, and restoring indigenous dignity" (Smith 35). Dai's retelling of Kajinsha's fate does not merely offer a revisionist biography; it exposes how the colonial state used written archives to criminalize indigenous resistance and erase state-sanctioned violence.

By staging this dialogue between Father Krick's written accounts and the tribe's oral memory, *The Black Hill* performs a key decolonial function. It demonstrates that history cannot be monopolized by those who hold the pen. Through creative counter-archiving, Dai unseats the colonial text from its position of absolute authority, proving that oral narratives provide an essential, sovereign critique of imperial history.

Myth, Landscape, and Collective Memory

In Western historiographical models, history and myth are traditionally positioned as binary opposites: history is categorized as objective, chronological, and empirical, while myth is dismissed as subjective, timeless, and fictitious. Decolonial scholarship critiques this division, arguing that the exclusion of mythic and spiritual dimensions from historical discourse serves to invalidate indigenous worldviews. In *The Darker Side of Western Modernity*, Walter Dignolo asserts that decoloniality requires "epistemic delinking"—a break from linear temporalities that categorize indigenous ways of knowing as primitive or mythical remnants of the past (Dignolo 45). In *The Legends of Pensam*, Mamang Dai performs this epistemic delinking by integrating myth, landscape, and collective memory into a unified, indigenous historical continuum.

Central to the novel's structure is the Adi concept of pensam, an Adi word translating roughly to "in-between" or a middle realm. Rather than viewing time as a rigid, forward-moving line, pensam signifies a fluid spatial and temporal zone where the visible and invisible, the historical past and the living present, continuously

intersect. Dai defines this indigenous ontology in an extended passage that illustrates the permeability of memory and reality:

In the language of the tribe, pensam means 'in-between.' It is the middle ground, a place of sanctuary between what was and what will be, between the world of spirits and the world of men. In our stories, a person can walk into the forest and step straight into another time, or sit by the river and hear the voices of those who died a hundred years ago. Nothing is ever truly lost or finished in pensam; the past is not behind us, it is all around us, waiting in the shadows of the trees and the sound of the water. (Dai 8)

This block quotation reveals how pensam functions as an alternative temporal architecture. By locating historical experience within an "in-between" space, Dai rejects the colonial mandate that the past is dead, archived, and superseded by modern progress. Instead, ancestral history remains immediately accessible through collective memory and oral performance.

Within this framework, the physical landscape the mountains, rivers, and forests of Arunachal Pradesh serves as an active, living archive rather than a passive backdrop for human activity. In imperial documentation, land is treated as property to be surveyed, mapped, and exploited. In contrast, Dai shows that for the Adi people, geography is imbued with historical agency and communal memory. As Jan Vansina observes, oral traditions are frequently anchored to specific physical landmarks, which act as mnemonic devices that trigger historical recollection (Vansina 125).

In *The Legends of Pensam*, every river bend and mountain pass carries a story of tribal migration, conflict, or ancestral intervention. Dai illustrates this deep ecological memory through a running quotation, noting that for her people, "the river does not merely flow through our land; it remembers every footstep that ever crossed it and every song sung on its banks" (Dai 52). When colonial authorities attempted to draw administrative boundaries through these hills, they failed to recognize that the land was already fully mapped through centuries of oral topography.

Furthermore, Dai uses myth not as a flight from reality, but as a vehicle for historical truth. When strange or traumatic events occur such as the arrival of foreign technologies, British military expeditions, or unexplained deaths the village community metabolizes these disruptions through mythic storytelling. For instance, the arrival of the first British surveyors and their mysterious instruments is remembered not through cold administrative dates, but through supernatural lore regarding "the white spirits who measured the air" (Dai 112).

By weaving historical events into the mythic fabric of the tribe, Dai preserves the emotional, ethical, and spiritual truth of those encounters as experienced by the community. As Homi K. Bhabha argues in *Nation and Narration*, the narrative construction of a community relies on "the performance of memory," where cultural traditions are continuously re-enacted to resist total assimilation by the state (Bhabha 298).

Ultimately, *The Legends of Pensam* demonstrates that myth and landscape are essential components of indigenous historiography. By grounding historical continuity in the fluid realm of pensam and the living memory of the environment, Dai provides a powerful counter-model to colonial historical reductionism, asserting that an indigenous community's past cannot be separated from its sacred geography.

Conclusion

Historical writing in North-East India has long wrestled with the dominance of imperial archives that categorized indigenous oral cultures as pre-historic or peripheral. Through *The Legends of Pensam* and *The Black Hill*, Mamang Dai performs a vital act of decolonial intervention. Rather than treating oral storytelling as mere folklore, decorative myth, or passive cultural nostalgia, Dai positions oral narratives as a sovereign, dynamic, and rigorous methodology of alternative historiography.

By bringing Jan Vansina's framework on oral tradition into direct conversation with Walter Dignolo's decolonial option and Linda Tuhiwai Smith's indigenous methodologies, this study has demonstrated how Dai destabilizes the absolute authority of the colonial text. In *The Black Hill*, Dai directly interrogates nineteenth-century British administrative records and Father Nicolas Krick's missionary accounts, exposing the ideological mechanics of colonial textuality while restoring historical interiority and agency to figures like Kajinsha. In *The Legends of Pensam*, she utilizes the Adi concept of pensam to dismantle Western linear chronologies, showing how collective memory and the living landscape function as a continuous, un-colonizable archive.

Ultimately, Dai's fiction proves that the absence of a written script is not an absence of history. Storytelling emerges from her work not as a primitive precursor to literacy, but as an active mode of epistemic disobedience a resilient method of counter-archiving that preserves indigenous sovereignty, ethics, and historical truth. In reclaiming the spoken word against the imperial pen, Mamang Dai offers a powerful framework for decolonizing history across postcolonial and indigenous literary studies.

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