

The Bridge is broken”: Restory(i)ng the Culture of the Land in Mamang Dai’s *The Legends of Pensam*

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Abstract:

Drawing on the critical insights and reading strategies of postcolonial ecocriticism and Indigenous studies, the paper highlights the destructive effects of colonialism and ‘capitalist’ globalization on the land and culture of the Adi tribe from Arunachal Pradesh. In the face of globalization’s negative impact on tribal cultures, as outlined by Kailash C. Baral, the article examines ethno-ecocentric concerns in Mamang Dai’s *The Legends of Pensam*. The paper is divided into four sections. The first section discusses the emergence of postcolonial ecocriticism and its subsequent intersection with Indigenous studies. The second section sheds light on the liminality of tribal life, wherein nature and culture don’t exist as separate entities. The third section adopts an ecological perspective to analyse the impact of globalization on Adi cultural practices. The final section reveals how the novel highlights the role of “Empire and capitalism” in causing socio-ecological disruption to the tribal land and forests. The study concludes with Dai’s implicit message to reimagine the ‘old ways’, bridging the gap between nature and culture, and between the worlds of spirits and humans.

Keywords: orality, ecology, pensam, globalization, colonialism, postcolonial ecocriticism and Anthropocene

Introduction: Postcolonial Ecocriticism and Indigenous Environments

Environmental historians and postcolonial critics have shown how European incursions into non-Western regions of the globe led to the destruction of indigenous environments on an unprecedented scale. They have emphasized that colonial invasions of other non-European territories following the discovery of the “New World” by the Italian navigator and explorer Christopher Columbus in 1492 resulted not only in mass killings and the extermination of Indigenous populations but also in a radical transformation and degradation of the “colonised natures.” Alfred Crosby’s groundbreaking work, *Ecological Imperialism: The Biological Expansion of Europe*,

900-1900 (1986), critically examines the ecological impact of settler colonialism on indigenous lands. He argues that colonial conquest led to the formation of the “Neo-Europes [on] lands thousands of kilometers from Europe and from each other” (2). This demonstrates how the origin of “Neo-Europes” entailed a global transfer and movement of people, plants, animals, and diseases between Europe and its colonies, as well as within the European colonies. Crosby introduced the term “ecological imperialism” to describe how European settlement in foreign regions inflicted irreversible damage on colonized lands. His conceptualization of ‘ecological imperialism’ enabled later scholars, critics and writers to initiate diverse critical inquiries into the relationship between “Environment and Empire” and between “Anthropocene and Empire” (Grove; Beinart & Lotte; MacKenzie; Tiffin; Balkan). Drawing on Crosby’s discursive formulation of ‘ecological imperialism’ in the creation of ‘neo-Europes’ far away from actual Europe, Graham Huggan and Helen Tiffin (2007), in the essay “Green Postcolonialism”, have observed that,

Under European colonial rule, the resources of the invaded, conquered and settled territories were exploited for imperial profit; and cash cropping and other European agricultural practices usually replaced hunting and subsistence farming, thereby damaging established ecosystems, reducing soil fertility, or even, as in the case of the Sahara, resulting in desertification. Whatever the extent of the change, the dispossessed frequently faced poverty and starvation, and the original accommodated relations between environment, humans and animals were fractured, sometimes beyond repair (1-2).

In *Culture and Imperialism*, Edward Said affirms that imperialism operates as “an act of geographical violence through which virtually every space in the world is explored, charted, and finally brought under control” (77). Building upon this premise, recent scholarship has forged a vital dialogue between postcolonialism and ecocriticism, focusing heavily on “postcolonial environments”—ecological spaces intrinsically shaped by imperial legacies (Huggan & Tiffin; Nixon; DeLoughrey & Handley; Roos & Hunt; Mukherjee; DeLoughrey et al.; Moolla; Ghosh). Emerging as a necessary corrective to the Euro-American ecocritical canon of the 1990s, this interdisciplinary framework questions traditional Anglo-American ecocriticism for its narrow focus on pastoral and deep ecological paradigms, its inattention to non-Western literatures, and its failure to critique the environmental impacts of colonial and neo-colonial incursions. Consequently, postcolonial ecocriticism provides an essential alternative reading strategy. By moving beyond the confines of traditional Western nature writing to include texts from diverse metropolitan locales, scholars increasingly utilize this postcolonial lens to confront ongoing imperialist ideologies of economic and environmental dominance, particularly within the Global South.

Since its inception as an alternative ecocritical paradigm, postcolonial ecocriticism has focused primarily on non-European and indigenous literatures, including various art forms such as music, song, painting, cinema, and dance, in its ecocritical explorations. As a reading strategy and a literary movement, postcolonial ecocriticism synthesizes the concerns of the environmental justice movement with the methodologies and tenets of postcolonial studies. In the current scenario of 'economic globalism', postcolonial ecocriticism's primary focus is to interrogate the socio-ecological consequences of 'resource imperialism' and 'land grabs' unleashed by colonial/neocolonial powers, multinational companies, and the neoliberal post-colonial governments of the 21st century. Graham Huggan and Helen Tiffin (2007) have underscored the ongoing onslaught by corporate powers and local governments on the indigenous and/or postcolonial ecologies. According to them,

The operation of the European empires both initiated and depended upon a globalism that still provides the economic, communicative and, at least to a degree, political foundation for the highly diverse interconnections grouped as 'globalization' today. ... Both the exploitation of the resources of formerly colonized countries and their co-optation to European or Euro-American world views continues under contemporary globalization. Just as colonies once provided the raw materials for European industrialization, post-independence states now frequently find themselves exploited by multinational companies (sometimes in league with corrupt post-independence politicians). The poorer majority are cut off from traditional forms of subsistence while still being denied access to the profits of their own resources (2). In its later development, postcolonial ecocriticism allied with Indigenous studies to explore the cosmological vision of indigenous art and tradition. It has also focused on the incidents of indigenous resistance and environmental resilience against the forces of 'global corporations' and internal colonialism. The studies have focused on the ecological imagination and aesthetics of indigenous art and thought. Some of the major ecocritical readings of Indigenous lifeworlds highlight the impact of the colonial and neo-colonial extractive economy on Indigenous cultures and environments. Such readings also examine the relationship between storytelling and ecology. Moreover, they articulate the ecological potential of indigenous worldviews, songs, dances and foodways; explore the animistic faiths and multispecies ethics of indigenous groups; differentiate between Indigenous and Western concepts of 'nature' and 'place' and illustrate the eco-poetics of Indigenous oral narratives. In this context, *Ecocriticism and Indigenous Studies* (Monani and Adamson 2017) marks a significant evolution in ecocriticism towards the inclusion "of the voices and struggles of marginalised minorities and specifically to the struggles of global Indigenous communities engaging in innovative coalitional work" (5). The book delves into an exploration of three key themes of "resilience, resistance, and multispecies relations" that link ecocriticism with Indigenous studies (10).

Inhabiting the In-Between Space: Nature and Culture in *The Legends of Pensam*

In her essay, "Oral Narratives and Myth" (2009), Mamang Dai argues that the tribal cultures of Arunachal Pradesh are imbued with ecological ethics and a deep knowledge of environmental conservation and sustainability. She claims that nature for the mountainous tribes of the state contains an intrinsic value and is integral to their survival. Commenting on the environmental culture of the tribes, Dai emphasises the need to foreground the oral traditions of "the Tani group of tribes" (2) for their socio-ecological value. She affirms that myth and memory are 'a storehouse' of a community's ways of identifying with the world outside. According to Dai, these ways of seeing and living on earth had once formed "a code of conduct that became the basis for daily customary practice as observed by the tribes" (5). The stories suggest that the community's relationship with the non-human environment should be maintained through strategies of negotiation, compromise and symbiosis. The oral narratives of the tribes take us not only to the past but also open doorways for the present and the future as catalysts. Dai, herself a storyteller, looks up to the other storytellers with hopeful eyes, believing that they won't let the oral tales and songs become a kind of "dead literature." She concludes her essay with the remark that so long as the storytellers continue to weave stories of the past and daily activities of life in nature, the ancient tribal culture, which was based on the philosophy of *Donyi-Polo*, will continue to flourish. At the centre of this philosophy lies the ideals of coexistence and harmony between different life forms and between nature and humans. She writes in the same essay,

The tribes of Arunachal Pradesh have always lived off the forest without any threat to the ecosystem. The tenets of traditional practice are deep rooted in environment ethics, supporting a close and harmonious relationship with nature. Arunachal tribes have a tremendous knowledge of the use of plants for native medicine and the instructions handed down from generation to generation are contained in stories and myths that is a unique feature of the different communities living here (2).

Mamang Dai turns back to the ancient myths and rituals of the Adis to decipher and re-establish the old relations between humans, nonhumans and nature. She advocates for the revival of "the tenets of indigenous faith called the way of *Donyi-Polo*, literally translated as *Donyi-sun, Polo-moon*" (2) to rebuild the 'bridge' that is broken between her people and nature. Dai underscores the importance of rewriting and re-righting the primitive history of the hill tribes, archived principally in oral narratives and folk songs, in order to restore the missing links of faith and stewardship between the 'urbanised' tribal people and nature. *The Legends of Pensam* (2006), as a series of folk narratives, alerts its readers against the intrusive and colonizing effects of urban modernity, which, if not resisted, will cost the Adis their land and culture. In its narrative framework, the novel draws heavily on the oral literature of tribes. The stories are presented as episodes of daily struggles and

activities of the Adi community, for the writer assumes that “now the stories are inseparable from the routine daily life, the customary practices of a community” (Dai 2005, 4). Dai foregrounds a strong bond between nature and humans as she embarks on a journey of retelling the tales of her ancestors. She stresses the need to sing and recount the old songs and myths for both communal and environmental well-being. The oral tales in the book are imbued with such socio-ecological knowledge that most environmentalists around the globe find crucial in mitigating the social and environmental crises of our times. Mamang Dai notes,

Almost all of tribal belief is tied up with agricultural practice, but though the festivals are agricultural rites marking the passage of the seasons, the religious aspect is always present along with the recollection of a serene and happy co-existence with the natural world that helped man to survive in a harsh environment all these years with very little contact with the outside world (3).

Weaving together a rich collection of tales, songs, and landscapes from Arunachal Pradesh, *The Legends of Pensam* (2006) represents Dai's effort to reconstruct the Adi tribe's cultural heritage. By reviving traditional myths, rituals, music, festivals, and historical anecdotes, the narrative seeks to re-envision the community's history. She informs the reader that the word “Pensam” stands for a virtual space that is ‘in-between’ and, by implication, also for the Adis who inhabit the in-between space and are also called ‘the in-between people.’ Thus, ‘pensam’ may be interpreted as an intersectional ground where diverse and opposing viewpoints and geographies of culture and life intersect. “Pensam” appears as the site of negotiation, of confluence and mediation. One can argue, after understanding Dai's conception of ‘pensam’, that this is not just an epithet that defines ‘in-between’ people and places but an aesthetics, and a primordial philosophy that seeks to bind the distinctive realms of humans, nonhumans and the material environment together. At the heart of this philosophical approach lies the urgent desire for the resolution of conflicting situations between man and nature. The reason the Adis are known to inhabit the “middle ground” can be traced in Mamang Dai's description of their attitude towards other forms of life, the Adis practice an animistic faith that is woven around forest ecology and co-existence with the natural world. There are few road links in their territory. Travel to the distant villages still entails cumbersome river crossings, elephant rides, and long foot marches through dense forest or over high mountain passes. (*The Legends of Pensam*, “author's note”)

Rather than focusing on the course of events in the lives of certain individuals, *The Legends of Pensam* (hereafter *TLP*) represents nature, spirits, nonhuman creatures and the community as characters. Mamang Dai re-visions the primary notion of a character in literary texts, which is normatively understood as a human-like figure. The narratives in the novel are integrated with nonhuman

characters. Dai portrays the trees, the river, the forest, the animals, and the mountains as breathing and thinking characters. In these tales, the trees weep, the mountains roar, the rivers feel enraged and sad, the spirits follow the humans, and the incessant rains grow into monstrous floods. The author, as both a weaver and a teller of stories, serves as one of the novel's multiple narrators. In her narrative role, she chronicles the community's diverse life experiences and significant historical moments. The stories narrated here are, in fact, about the writer and her people. In this novel, storytelling is primarily an attempt at historicizing the culture and the place that the Adi tribe has inhabited for centuries. The stories relate a history of cultural loss, dispossession, violence and environmental destruction on account of colonial and post-colonial interventions. The legends speak of the tribe's struggles, negotiations and compromises for survival in the face of natural catastrophes and foreign invasions. They are characterized by wit, humour, imagination and ecological wisdom, which "equipped the tribes with the requirements for co-existence between *humans, animals and spirits* in a harsh environment" (Dai "On Creation Myths and Oral Narratives" 6; emphasis added). While engaging with contemporary identity politics between people of different religions and ethnicities, the writer takes a journey both backwards and forward to foreground the endangered state of the Adi cultural heritage. In this specific context, the fictional narratives that rework myths, legends and history are ingrained with animistic faith, indigenous wisdom and lifeworlds. The stories are presented as situations that suggest effective solutions to contemporary issues of cultural and environmental loss.

The novel, with its first-person narration, adopts a hybrid form. It borrows from history, travelogue, diary-writing, and folklore. Starting with a 'prologue' which sets the narrative framework, the novel is divided into four loosely connected sections: 'a diary of the world', 'songs of the rhapsodist', 'daughters of the village' and 'a matter of time.' The four sections are interwoven with stories as chapters about the cultural history of the Adi tribe. The prologue tells that six people, including the author-narrator, are flying from Assam to Arunachal Pradesh in a helicopter. The landscape changes from plains to hills as they enter Arunachal Pradesh. The writer, along with her friend Mona, is travelling back to her birthplace. She guides her friend into the central region of the Adi people, where the mightiest river in Arunachal Pradesh, the *Siang*, also known as Tsangpo in Tibet, flows down into the Siang Valley. Reminiscent of her childhood, Mamang Dai recalls her past, juxtaposing it with the present. She writes tales about cultural shifts and historical incidents spanning pre-colonial to post-colonial times.

The narrator took her friend to the village of Gurdum, her birthplace, where she grew up before leaving for "the big city", and from there, they moved to Duyang, 'the village of widows.' Her friend Mona, a magazine editor, searched for interesting stories that would narrate the hidden or little-known realms of tribal culture and

territories. The narrator had already been to Duyang a few times since the village was her mother's ancestral home, and she knew some families there. The narrator and her friend went up the hill to meet Hoxo, the village's headman, who lived with his mother, wife, sons and daughters-in-law. The narrator had heard stories about Hoxo and his wife, Losi, who became "the boy who fell to earth, and the girl born to the river woman" (13). The narrator shows the significance of storytelling for the tribal communities. The reader learns that everyone in the village is a storyteller and that these stories preserve their cultural roots. The stories are not entirely fictional, for they serve as documents of indigenous wisdom, knowledge, customs, and history, offering deep insights into the community's relationship with their land and environment. They help the tribe keep their communal ties and cultural roots intact. The stories are neither 'closed texts' nor are they similar for diverse communities and places. The indigenous ways of telling stories and their characters are as diverse as ethnic and tribal groups. Though a universal thread unites them across times and places, they consistently address vital socio-ecological issues, offering communal survival strategies against both natural and human-made threats. In her essay, "The Nature of Faith and Worship Among Adis" (2004), Mamang Dai contends, "When life was harsh and so unpredictable, these songs and legends could provide a new perspective, illuminate and explain certain things, and sometimes transform our lives" (90).

Globalization and Indigenous Cultures: An Ecological Perspective

"In the context of the tribes of Northeast India", Prof. K. C. Baral (2007) has observed that "it is feared that globalization may bring in large-scale commodification of their cultures and would erase their unique identities that are so far consolidated mostly on the premise of ethnic difference." (186) In his much-cited essay, "Globalization and Tribes of Northeast India" (2006), Baral critically examines the negative impact of 'globalization' on the tribal cultures of Northeast India. He begins his argument by focusing on the paradoxical character of globalization, which has continued to elicit ambivalent responses, dividing people, organizations, and countries into opposing camps. Prof Baral (2006) defines globalization as "a process that cuts across the boundaries of nations, cultures and societies privileging a move towards larger integration of the world and facilitating interdependence moving towards a global culture" (3). He argues that globalization as a cultural, political, and economic process has been criticized, and therefore, resisted too, for showing up as an "extension of Western capitalism" which, "empowered by free market economy", tends to "perpetuate neo-colonialism" (3). Baral further claims that globalization works by homogenizing space, things, cultures, attitudes, and knowledge, which both undermines and subverts the differences to establish "the hegemony of dominant cultures" which threatens "the existing practices of many items" of the tribal and/or peripheral cultures (2007, 193). This is one of the reasons why, according to Prof Baral, globalization has met resistance from the locals "in the form of a vehement articulation ... for preservation of indigenous cultures and identities" (2006, 3). He

further downplays the claims of “a pure, uncontaminated, unique tribal identity that needs to be protected from outside influence” however, he acknowledges the need to retrieve and preserve the “tribal ways of living and cultural practices” (2007, 190) against the ongoing trends of “development and modernization” in India’s Northeast. Baral identifies an ecological imperative to recuperate and protect “the tribal culture and identity in the context of modernity, development, and globalization” (192). While raising concerns over the efficacy of contemporary development policies and goals for tribal regions, Prof Baral suggests that “The only question that needs to be asked regarding development is whether it is suitable for the geography, the environment, and the local conditions” (192). He concludes his arguments by stating that globalization presents a mixed horizon for Northeastern tribal cultures, presenting valuable avenues for “forging new alliances while consolidating old identities” (197). However, Professor Temsula Ao (2006), another prominent literary voice from the region, warns that for Naga and other tribal groups, globalization acts as a “purely economic theory” leading to the “loss of distinctive identity markers” (7). She emphasizes that communities must strategically navigate these commodifying market forces, which tend to “reduce identity to anonymity ... for greater marketability” (7).

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The Legends of Pensam appears both as a timely response and a cautionary signal to the fears and anxieties of the Northeast tribes, as stipulated by Prof Baral, regarding the impact of globalization – in the spheres of culture and development – on the tribal identity and culture. In this novel, Mamang Dai expresses her concerns over the moral and cultural decline of the Adi community under the influence of colonialism and globalization with its neo-colonial character. Over the years, since her childhood, the author has witnessed the villages, which once “heaved with life” (4), now turning into deserted places because young people have migrated to the cities and new urban locations for education, work, and modern lifestyle. The novel provides a critique of ‘capitalism and development’ for alienating the tribes from their ancestral culture and environment. Mamang Dai considers ‘postcolonial

development' for the Northeastern states as anathema to their geographical specificities and indigenous ethos. *The Legends of Pensam* depicts how certain tribal customs and rituals are integral to preserving livelihoods and the natural environment. Beyond folklore, the legends in Dai's fiction offer a window into daily life, shedding light on traditional architecture, domestic spaces, and the specific ways granaries were built right alongside village houses. The oral stories contain 'dynamic epistemologies' of human existence and progress. They disseminate an ethics of connection between people and their surrounding environment. The novel comprises retellings of the old tales and weaves new stories about the present conditions and their future implications for the Adi people. The legends of Pensam are cautionary tales about the loss of nature and Indigenous cultural identity due to economic globalization and the assimilationist thrust of the dominant outside cultures. Indigenous stories are not just about the past but also about imagining and engaging with the threats of the present and the future. In this context, the socio-environmental significance of indigenous storytelling has been widely acknowledged (Fernandez-Llamazares & Cabeza 2017; Nanson 2021). Joni Adamson and Salma Monani (2017) refer to certain Indigenous practices that "caution us against considering Indigenous stories or cosmovisions a panacea for ecological viability and remind us of the complex situatedness of local practices" (9). Nevertheless, they argue that in most cases, these stories inhere 'cosmovisions' which articulate dynamic epistemologies that have been negotiated over long histories (sometimes thousands of years), and many present sound ethical and scientific reasoning for ecological protection. Passed down through the centuries, they offer models of long-term conservation practice and scientific knowledge. ... Such oral knowledges are understood more and more as "archives," or sophisticated "cosmographies" (Walls 2009, 212), that have allowed communities to express their own "scientific" literacies about ecosystem connections (9).

In *The Legends of Pensam*, Mamang Dai highlights the disastrous impact of urbanization and infrastructure projects on the jungles and the villages of Arunachal Pradesh. She illustrates how infrastructure development in remote areas, intended to link them with urban centres, inflicts profound cultural and ecological devastation. By critiquing the postcolonial state's extractive economic model, she highlights how natural wealth is siphoned away with minimal financial reinvestment returning to the highlands. Furthermore, the influx of a migrant workforce compromises the security of indigenous populations; in the villages of Duyang, this migration has left residents vulnerable to theft and infectious diseases. Dai depicts images of "the thinning jungle" (TLP 12) and "the dying villages" (162). Critiquing the developmental ideology of the state, Mamang Dai records the unecological character of 'urban building' in the hilly terrains. every day, the hills echoed with the sound of heavy trucks bumping and screeching up the hillside carrying iron and cement. They scraped the riverbed for sand and blew up rocks that hung over the cut earth, threatening to

smash the bulldozers and workmen who blew whistles and ran like ants on the edge of the mountain. New faces appeared among the foliage. They came from far away. Rows of bamboo shacks sprang up along the opened earth and smoke billowed out in dense plumes as the labour force settled in. A bamboo tube drew the perennial moisture trickling down the crevices into a source of water better than any tap in the towns. Big boulders strewn about served as laundry stones where naked children played in rain or sun, and women bathed and smiled at passing men who stared at the wet clothes that clung to their bodies.

A seductive new challenge emanated from these shacks. As the road stretched further with the oil and sweat of black fires and coal tar, the worker-women distilled the dregs of carbide and mountain rice into a witches' brew that turned the men of the village into feverish addicts roaming the nights with a yellow light glinting in their eyes (150).

The above excerpts reveal how the neo-liberal form of economic development has posed not only ecological and cultural threats but also threats to the life and livelihood of the tribal communities. The author feels deeply concerned about the depletion of oral narratives, which ensured the community's survival against external and internal threats. The loss of old stories led to people's disengagement with indigenous ways of sustainable living. Dai shows that the socio-ecological cost of 'neoliberal development' in recent decades has been such that most primitive villages are on the verge of becoming uninhabitable. The novelist effectively conveys through the 'songs of the rhapsodist' the ramifications of 'neoliberal development' for the community and the environment. The continued migration of young generations has ruined the traditional economic base. Besides this, those who have decided not to leave their ancestral home are forced to become daily wagers on construction sites. Though the writer does not seem to endorse an outright rejection of the developmental activities in the hills, she advocates for a framework of economic development that is attentive to local conditions. Dai advocates for the important role of village representatives in preparing and executing the developmental plans for the hilly region. She highlights the conflict of interest between residents and government functionaries regarding development initiatives for rural areas. During a meeting of the village council called to address issues of theft and unsustainable construction of a new road, a resident named Larik contests the idea of "progress" in the Duyang region. While addressing the village council, he criticizes the village elders for surrendering 'the ancestral land to the government', openly questioning whether the state's aggressive development policies truly benefit the region. Larik argues,

This one terrible road is all they have managed for us in fifty years! And what does it bring us? Outsiders. Thieves. Disease. Will this road bring us good health? A

new school? Look at the one we have now. The first school built in the region—but has anyone showed any interest? Wait, they say all the time. Everything takes time, they say. But I tell you, I have seen the roads in the capital and they are worse than the one they are building here. If they cannot tidy up there what guarantee do we have that they will give us anything good here, especially when they don't know or bother to find out who we are and how we live! (156)

Dai argues that it is because of the devastating effects of physical and cultural alienation of the tribal youth in the era of globalisation and '*Sanskritization*' that "the bridge is broken." The bridge, as Larik attempts to define it, is not one built of concrete and iron but of the ethical values and worldviews of the Indigenous communities. Larik further comments that the bridge once connected the old world of the tribes with the world of modernity and capitalist development. It was this bridge that provided the village youth with connectivity to the cities for education and work. Though they were materially displaced from their locations, they stayed connected to the people and the land through the myths and memories of the past, which preserved their core indigenous lifeways. Larik points out that the native culture of environmental care and protection of the land has been losing ground to the forces of 'global industrialism' and urban materialism. He blames the corruption of the Adi community's core ethical values for this decline. In the underlying passage, the narrator points out the ecological cost of the material separation of tribal youth from their ancestral lands and the following loss of indigenous lifeworlds and knowledge systems. However, both the narrator and Larik are optimistic about the construction of 'a new bridge' (163) that would fill up the cultural gap between the old and the new generations. The urban youth who once migrated from the remote hills would rebuild connections with their ancestral home. Driven by a periodic desire to return to their native villages, they aim to follow the paths of their elders, paving the way for 'sustainable development' in the region.

In Larik's mind, the bridge was the long crossing that had made these men noted government servants and officers. Across this divide the officers surrounded themselves with papers and a new script and hardly looked up from their desks. If they did, sometimes, they might notice a slight stirring on the other side. There, the dead were being buried, but these men had no time to take leave and be present at the village in proper custom. The youth were caught agitating, and there was no time to sit with them through the days and nights and ease their frustration. Yes, the bridge was swaying and slowly tearing away. Land was being stolen. Forests were being cut and logs floated away down the river. New fences marked old territory and it seemed a curtain had fallen over the old villages. What was once sacred, the old sense of joy, was being lost (163).

Mamang Dai explores how acculturation has transformed the indigenous nature-culture continuum. The age-old connection between the native self and the environment has deteriorated as indigenous communities have integrated into the dominant outside culture, effects of which, the novelist shows, are evident in the daily routines and lifestyles of the Adi men and women. There was a time when nature was revered and sacred to the tribespeople, but it has now become a place of leisure and recreation. The novel highlights the uncological or anti-nature tendencies of urban tourism. The narrator depicts that the environmental crisis of the postcolonial world is rooted in the cultural crisis. She shows how living in a degraded environment causes social anxiety and moral decline in people, who then begin to view nature as an object of hatred and opposition. In this context, Dai avoids an uncritical or idealised portrayal of the native as a “noble savage” or an “ecological Indian” living in flawless harmony with nature. Her tribal characters are not portrayed as invariably infallible or untainted; rather, their moral compromise is frequently depicted as a direct consequence of losing touch with traditional cultural practices.

When the rains ceased, the day became vaporous and sluggish. Men stopped thinking and sometimes, in a moment of madness, they rushed into the forest to hack at the undergrowth and hunt with brutal instinct, killing three deer in one night. Others fled to the great river, casting their nets into the summer flood while their women waited, exhausted at home. The men trampled the forest and shouted at the wind. They tore into the earth, felled trees, ravaged the soft soil, and wept in their dreams, not knowing what or whom they mourned (168).

Mamang Dai aims to restore forest ethics and tribal unity by retelling the oral stories of the Adis. She describes how these stories are crucial in reclaiming cultural identity and ecological balance. In the first story, readers encounter the indigenous worldview and code of conduct that the Adi tribe followed when entering the forest. Hoxo's son, Bodak, recounts Kalen's story before the narrator and her friend, Mona. The narrator retells the story of a tragedy—a hunting accident caused by a disregard for forest ethics. The story warns tribesmen against violating the Indigenous ethos, which “serves as philosophical engagements to navigate the everyday ethics of living in wider worlds with humans and nonhumans alike” (Adamson and Monani 8).

Through her visits to remote Adi villages, Mamang Dai learns about the rising frequency of hunting accidents. The novel begins with stories of accidental killings during hunting expeditions. The narrator examines that the primary cause of such tragic incidents was the corrupting influence of colonialism on Indigenous ecocultures, which had been built on sustainable relationships between living and non-living entities. Influenced by ‘other’ cultures, the mountain tribes stopped following their traditional rituals and hunting practices. Once primarily a means of survival, hunting became a recreational activity as tribesmen began to hunt for sport.

Non-indigenous cultural practices, which did not originate from local needs and conditions, discredited the long-standing customs of tribal hunting. Another example of Indigenous cultural corruption due to colonial invasion and urban development, which Pinyar, a village widow, linked to hunting misfortunes, was the excessive consumption of “si-ye cakes” by the hunting parties before entering the forest. These cakes were made by mixing “the white powder with ground rice and root and berries and shaped into small flat biscuits” (29). Pinyar explained to the narrator that the hallucinatory effects of the drug were the main cause of deaths in the forests. She also mentioned that each tribal clan once observed a customary ban on the use of local drinks and drugs during hunting season. The intake of ‘si-ye cakes’ and rice beer was limited to special occasions and rituals. These substances were part of specific ceremonies, and their misuse was considered taboo.

The Ecological Cost of Empire and Capitalism

The relationship between environment and empire represents one of the most crucial yet often obscured aspects of climate change and global justice. Environmental historiography from the late 20th and early 21st centuries underscores that imperial expansion was never merely a political or military project—it was fundamentally an ecological endeavour, centred on extracting, transforming, and controlling nature across vast terrains. To understand the true nature of an empire, one requires to recognize how power operates through landscapes, resources, and the very fabric of the earth. (Beinart & Lotte 2007; MacKenzie 2015) In her book, *Ecology and Power in the Age of Empire* (2017), Corey Ross presents a historical analysis of modern imperialism’s destructive transformations of the tropical and sub-tropical environments of colonized territories during the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. Exploring the relationship between ecology and imperial power, she argues that European imperial powers spawned a range of different methods for extracting wealth from nature, from plantations and mining complexes to new forms of agriculture and ‘rational’ land management systems. It stimulated a huge increase in the traffic of living organisms around the globe. At the heart of European imperialism was an attempt to transform forests, savannahs, rivers, coastal plains, and deserts into productive and legible spaces, all of which brought hefty environmental consequences: deforestation, erosion, siltation, pollution, disease, and habitat destruction (3).

The environmental impacts of empire endure today as enduring legacies of global inequality. The monocultures of plantation systems, the toxic scars of mining, and the deforestation accompanying colonial agriculture are not relics but ongoing ecological crises (Shiva 2005). Contemporary climate change bears the imprint of imperial resource extraction: the fossil fuels that powered industrial empires now threaten the very regions subjected to colonial rule. The environmental debt of the empire accumulates over time. Postcolonial criticism of the interlocking between empire, ecology and power questions narratives that naturalize imperial

environmental change as inevitable “development” or “progress.” Ideas like “wastelands” needing improvement, “empty” territories awaiting settlement, or “backward” farming practices requiring modernization served to legitimize the colonial acts of ecological violence. Indigenous and colonised peoples’ sophisticated environmental knowledge systems were systematically dismissed and destroyed, even as the empire appropriated and exploited the local knowledge systems, from rubber tapping to medicinal plants and navigation skills.

Contemporary environmental politics continues to be influenced by the colonial history of resource extraction and environmental management. Conservation efforts, particularly in the Global South, often replicate colonial logics, displacing indigenous peoples to create “wilderness” reserves that erase centuries of human-environmental interaction. International development schemes often continue resource extraction under new guises. The categories through which we understand “nature” and “environment” carry traces of imperial thought. Comprehending the environment and empire is essential for addressing today’s ecological crises. It reveals how environmental destruction and social injustice are interconnected legacies of the same historical processes. It urges us to reconsider that what is called the “Anthropocene” might more accurately be termed the “Capitalocene” (Moore) or “Plantationocene” (Haraway & Tsing)—periods defined not by generic human impact but by specific histories of capitalist exploitation. Graham Huggan and Helen Tiffin (2007) argue that any meaningful response to today’s ecological challenges must confront the colonial roots of our current ecological order and the ongoing structures of imperial power that underpin both environmental destruction and proposed remedies.

Both the exploitation of the resources of formerly colonized countries and their co-optation to European or Euro-American worldviews continues under contemporary globalization. Just as colonies once provided the raw materials for European industrialization, post-independence states now frequently find themselves exploited by multinational companies (sometimes in league with corrupt post-independence politicians). The poorer majority are cut off from traditional forms of subsistence while still being denied access to the profits of their own resources (2). Amitav Ghosh’s critique of empire and capitalism in the non-fiction *The Great Derangement* (2017) is one of the most intellectually engaging contributions to climate change discussion. His main argument—that the climate crisis is fundamentally a crisis of culture rooted in imperial- capitalist modernity—merits serious attention. Ghosh traces the origin of the great derangement to what he calls the “Great Acceleration” of the mid-twentieth century; however, he locates its roots much earlier in the colonial-capitalist reshaping of the world. His analysis emphasises how European imperial expansion required a radical redefinition of nature as merely a resource, stripping it of agency and reducing it to extractable matter. This is not just

an economic critique but an epistemological indictment: empire demanded a particular way of viewing the world that made certain forms of violence not only permissible but also invisible. The plantation system, fossil fuel extraction, and the displacement of indigenous peoples are, for Ghosh, not isolated historical events but interconnected expressions of a single logic that still underpins modern environmental destruction. In his nonfiction *The Nutmeg's Curse: Parables for a Planet in Crisis* (2021), Amitav Ghosh highlights how Western discourses on climate change often conceal the central roles of “geopolitics, empire and the question of power” (116) in triggering the Anthropocene. He argues that most international debates on the climate crisis are “dominated by the question of capitalism and other economic issues” because “our very ways of thinking about the world” (116) are ‘unconsciously’ shaped by economic systems. To bolster his argument, Ghosh references numerous historical incidents to demonstrate that “the era of Western military conquests predates the emergence of capitalism by centuries. Indeed, it was these conquests and the imperial systems that arose in their wake that fostered and made possible the rise to dominance of what we now call capitalism” (116).

Mamang Dai delineates the rapid transformation of Adi territories triggered by the nineteenth-century incursions of colonial missionaries, cartographers, and military forces. The narrative highlights the profound ecological devastation wrought by the construction of the Ledo-Burma (Stilwell) Road during the Second World War. By bisecting the densely forested Adi lands, this infrastructural project served as a crucial supply line for Allied forces combating the Japanese in Burma (Myanmar). Dai offers a historical revisioning of this wartime enterprise by centering the oral testimonies of local villagers. The text reveals the colonial exploitation inherent in the project, noting the forced conscription of indigenous laborers—such as the fathers of characters Hoxo and Rakut—who were compelled by the *migluns* (white colonizers) to excavate tunnels in remote mountainous regions. Through these passages, the narrator reimagines the Stilwell Road’s construction not merely as a logistical triumph but as a site of profound socio-environmental trauma characterized by deforestation, animal brutality, and the systemic oppression of indigenous populations.

The *migluns* were terrifying in their energy and determination. In the lashing rain and the wet earth that buried men up to their waists, they drove elephants to cross rivers, remove logs and trample the jungle. The elephants strained and quivered to the shouts of their mahouts, slipped, struggled, knelt, struggled on, and many of the poor animals lost their footing and hurtled off the mountainside bellowing like mythical beasts with their eyes rolled up skywards. It was unimaginable, what the *migluns* were trying to achieve. In the swampy valleys men died like flies, shivering with fever and fear (39).

Even years later when those days were remembered, Rakut's father would talk animatedly of the thunder of cargo trucks and bulldozers, the shouts of men and how the jungle burst into flame as the mountain tops were blown off and the labour force struggled to claw their way through the rubble and drag the wretched road across the mutilated hills (40).

Dai depicts 'Empire and Capitalism' as two major forces behind the anthropogenic destruction of the hills and forests of her ancestral homeland. She draws attention to the thriving timber and mining industries in the region and argues that the colonial legacies of capitalist development, which designated the region as a 'resource frontier', have persisted into the post-independence period. The construction of large dams and tourism complexes in ecologically fragile zones has rendered life unsustainable in the remote villages. The narrator highlights the ecological impact of rapid urbanization and development projects in the villages of Duyang, Yagbo and Gurdum. The narrator contends that, for a few years, the region has experienced a sudden increase in landslides, floods, dust storms, and communal tensions due to 'economic development.' The impact of global climate change, driven by colonial invasion and capitalist development, is sadly felt by the villagers of Yagbo, who complain about disrupted seasonal cycles to the point of cursing the place. The narrator vividly captures the transformation of Gurdum from a tiny village of natural beauty into an expanding town of plastic and debris, for which the tribes are equally culpable, as "there seems to be a willing surrender *on their part* to the market forces for some success in the competitive economy of the globalized world" (Baral "Identity and Cultural Aporia" 196; emphasis added).

The town was permanently awash in debris. Plastic floated across the hills, clung to riverbanks, and perched on trees. 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. A row of labour sheds hung on to the hillside and here they lived, loved, bathed naked on the roadside, fought bitterly, and sometimes murdered each other. With their labour the new settlements were straining to expand against the rocky earth and rearing upwards, challenging the broken land and the falling mountains. The last row of lights reached midway up the mountains (164).

Conclusion

The Legends of Pensam initiates, in the garb of a writer's tribal manifesto, a process of cultural recovery, ecological literacy and historical mythmaking through indigenous storytelling. In this regard, the novel envisages the redemption of the people and the land by urging the tribe to revive the oral tradition to rebuild "the bridge that is broken." Dai's novel comes out as a celebration of 'orature', which contains the unique identity of Adi land and culture. While foregrounding an ancestral relationship to the forests and the hills, the book provides critiques of globalization,

neoliberal development and urban lifestyle in its recuperation of the broken chords of old relations between people and place. The author highlights how the homogenizing and assimilationist impulses of globalization and capitalist ideology have put the 'indigenous cultures' in crisis. The stories as chapters foreground the vital role of oral traditions in ecological and cultural regeneration by bringing forth a renewed sense of place in the wake of 'neocolonial exploitation' and 'postcolonial development.' It is in the context of 'postcolonial ecology' and 'indigenous eco-agency' that *The Legends of Pensam* carries out a socio-ecological inquiry into the tribal past for the future well-being while fostering "respect for the local along with an understanding of how global forces influence local life, that recognize human rights along with respect for the planet's life and life-support systems" (Vital and Hans-Georg Erney 10).

Moreover, Dai's environmentalism lies in her advocacy for the resurrection of the "old ways" of living and thinking, which had long upheld the "nature-culture-continuum." Her environmental activism is also explicit in her storytelling, which seeks to mobilize the tribal youth to secure the traditional food base, forestall nature's theft and reclaim land and food sovereignty. The book ends with Dai's appeal to the younger generation: "It was important to record our stories. The old rhapsodists were a dying breed, and when they were gone, who would remember" (*TLP* 176)? To this question, the 'legends' look up to the young generation to take up the role of the 'dying rhapsodists' as both singers and composers of the 'stories' of their people and land, the "stories" that matter in bringing about ecological reinhabitation and retribalization of the disconnected tribal youth.

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