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## **Bioregional Narrativity and the Ethos of Pensam: Rethinking Indigenous Identity and Ecological Wisdom in Mamang Dai's *'The Legends of Pensam'***

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### **Abstract**

The Legends of Pensam by Mamang Dai has been a breakthrough in Indian English literature because it is recording the endogenous identity and environmental knowledge of the Adi people in Arunachal Pradesh. The key idea in the work is the notion of the in-between or pensam, an Adi word that translates as between, that serves as a metaphor of how the tribe has been moving between the old animistic myths and the forces of modernity and colonialism. It is characterized by an environmentalist ethos in which tribal life is interwoven with the native fauna and spiritual terrain of the Siang valley. This paper discusses the relevance of these native memories and ecological relations, which are looked down upon by mainstream cultures as primitive, to the existence and modern identity of the community.

The Adi people have their ecological memory in the folklore, lived experiences, history, and animistic traditions, which are reflected in the work. It claims that tribal communities have relied on these memories as being the only primitive lifestyles that have helped the tribes to survive and to maintain their identity today. It is also through the spirit of indomitable pride and ecological wisdom of the Adi people that the work points to the one-dimensional representations of the Adi people.

**Keywords:** Bioregionalism, Pensam, Adi Tribe, Indigenous Identity, Ecological Wisdom, Oral Tradition, Modernity, Animism

### **Introduction**

Mamang Dai is a voice of the northeastern states of India, particularly Arunachal Pradesh, as a poet and novelist. Dai is a member of the Adi tribe and was born in Pasighat in 1957. As a writer, she is a part of the increasing literature of the region that attempts to

define the particular issues and the culture of the region that has an 'environmentalist ethos.' As a writer, Dai is an advocate of the culture, people, and the climate and geography of Arunachal Pradesh. According to Dai, writing that comes from Northeast India is writing with 'the language of hope.' According to her, her literature is the documentation of the 'history and the movement of people'.

*The Legends of Pensam* (2006) is a highly influential book that captures and describes the Adi community's traditions and way of life. The book is a hybrid of the stories, myths, and histories, life accounts of the Adi people, and is an important recollection of the testimony of the Adi tribe. The central theme of the book is highly symbolic, as the term 'pensam' in Adi translates to 'in-betweenness' and stands to refer to the 'hidden garden of the heart'. The Adis' 'in-betweenness' suggests and depicts their complicated negotiating in the interfaces of myth, reality or tradition and modernity. Most importantly, the book serves the purpose of recording the memories and wisdom of her community in order to save their small histories from being lost as a result of modernity.

The focus of this research involves examining the text through the paradigm of bioregional narrativity, which correlates cultural identity with particular ecological confines. For Dai, the location and geography are not simply background scenery but instead, a "living presence". She describes herself as "very attuned to the spirit of the place and the natural world". The Adi community holds an animistic belief system "woven around forest ecology and co-existence with the natural world". This connection provides their community with "real identity". One of the most valuable elements of this connection, bioregionalism, has been said to mirror the postcolonial struggle to rethink the integration of place and identity through the idea of human identity as membership to a collective of organic world. Dai reflects this by saying that in the Adi community, every element including boulders, trees, rivers, and mountains, is believed to possess a spirit and share a deep connection with human life.

Because of its utilization of orality, the novel stands out for its focus on the indigenous identity. "Ours is an oral tradition you know", Dai states. This oral tradition is associated with "stories pertaining to the sacredness of life, and what it is to be human". As E.V. Ramakrishnan and Anju Makhija indicate, Dai has "always been mindful of the several narratives of community, the myths and memory, the rituals and the encompassing architecture of shared belief in community", when it comes to poetry. This act of narrating and folklorizing, as in the case of the Adi creation myth which starts with 'Keyum' (Nothingness), defies modern logic. It has also survived the community's worldview. To the Adis, the stories reflected an important balance: the belief that hunting is appropriate, "but not for greed", as they would be hunting for survival.

*The Legends of Pensam* details the encounter of modernity, eco-centrality, and change that the Pensam world has to face and adapt to. The migluns(Britisher) brought

Western individualism, capitalism, and to an extent, Christianity, which disrupted and transformed the community and the ways people had been living. The book critiques modernity as a way of life that disrespects the earthly and aesthetic values of the natural world. The construction of a road is described as an "injury to the land", a "symbol of encroachment into the pristine lands" that modernity as theft of identity" that is "creeping into the villages and fields". The book, however, provokes the construction of a road as encroachment and the modernity as theft of identity. The book does however express the philosophy of the construction of change is an adaptation that brings the prospect of a completed arrangement of possibilities.

Dai, through her lyricism and personal history as an Adi tribal member, completed an ecocritical that illustrates the culture and the way of living and the mystique and resilience of her multi-culture and reflects adorning the core culture of life beyond of the indigenous lifestyle.

### **Review of Literatures**

1. Vandana describes bioregionalism as a rebellious decentralized approach and a way of reclaiming subalternized anticolonial epistemologies. Vandana considers The Legends of Pensam an example of bioregional ethos and resistance of stratification.
  2. Edward Said believes imagination is necessary for anti-imperialism because a postcolonial geography involves colonial geographies of violence. Thus, postcolonial writing is an act of myth making through the geography of the land.
  3. Kalyani Hazarika believes The Legends of Pensam articulates the plight of the contemporary Adi youth who try to consolidate their whimsical animistic past with modernity, Christianity, individualism, and the secular.
  4. Paban Chakraborty links Dai's storytelling to Environmental Justice and argues that the Adis' untainted landscape is "between the dominant culture" and the local culture. He considers the disconnection from nature as the reason of identity crisis.
  5. Mayuri Thakar and Dr. K. K. Budhbhatti point out that Mamang Dai adds value to the region by depicting culture, society, and landscape. They specifically mention The Legends of Pensam as an eco-criticism which exhibits the reconnection of Man and Nature.
- Pori Hiloidari: Describes The Legends of Pensam as crossing the border and recording the life experiences of the Arunachal Pradesh Adi tribe with intricate and sensitive storytelling that portrays the life of the rain-soaked area.
- Mary Ellen B. Lewis: Says that folklore and literature as a whole are the strands of culture, and to them as a unit, the study augments the understanding of the culture's and of the creator's and of the possessor's contrivances and the uses of the materials.
- Nigamananda Das: Describes Dai as the ecochronicler of Arunachal Pradesh, whose fiction is said to possess 'a deep sense of enigmatic ecology, pure animism, and the spiritual belief of her clan.

Temsula Ao: Characterizes 'writing orality' as the process of transliterating and documenting oral history, tales, and the Indigenous perspective of the world into written forms so that they may continue to be alive and active in literature. She points out the loss of unique attributes as a result of globalization, which is the primary threat to the tribal cultural identity.

### **Methodology**

This research uses qualitative content analysis to investigate the intersection of bioregional narrativity and indigenous identity as illustrated in Mamang Dai's *The Legends of Pensam*. The primary text is the novel, which provides a wealth of information about the heritage, belief systems, and history of the Adi tribe. The novel is explored through a prism of multi-faceted theories, especially bioregionalism and cultural identity. This geo-ecological and bioregionalism theory is important in assessing how the local geography, especially the Siang valley, mountains and rivers, is intertwined with the identity and perception of the characters. To this theory, the land is not just a backdrop in the story, but rather a 'living presence' that commands the people's culture. The method is also concerned with how the story represents the idea of Pensam, the symbolic in-between space that posits a tension between the mythical and the modern. Special attention is paid to the use of community's folklore in the story; these traditions are important markers of a community's collective memory and cultural history, especially of the Adi tribe, and their ability to resist external narratives and showcase indigenous intellect.

The study seeks to explain how the novel reclaims indigenous self-representation as a form of defense against colonial and homogenizing forces by analyzing modernity, the struggle of cultural preservation, and animism. This interpretation seeks to elucidate how the Adi identity is portrayed as active and multifaceted, as well as sustainable while being subjugated by geopolitical and socio-economic forces.

### **Mamang Dai's Literary Ethos and the Voice of the Periphery**

What Dai is doing and has done so far is an act of cultural self-preservation and self-representation in Arunachal Pradesh, the Land of the Dawn Lit Mountains, which is also the state she has the deepest attachment with. where Dai comes from, is the place she was born with an Adi ethnic background. As a civil servant in the IAS for a short time, a journalist, and a program officer in the WWF, she has a multi-layered professional background and therefore, a different angle to view the region. Celebrating the culture, the people, the ambience and the landscape, the critics acknowledge and celebrate the contribution of the region, Arunachal Pradesh, to the aesthetics. Dai has what one can call an eco-sensibility and as a result, she is able to knit the land and the identity of the people together in a unique way.

"The history and migration of the community" is what Dai traces through her work. She is also attempting to document the lives and the ways of the people. Due to modernity,

she observed, "small histories", in her words, were being lost. Imaginative literature, for Dai as a writer, is a way to reclaim, and to preserve lost narratives, which drives her work. From the Margin is where she derives her perspective from, and for some, her aim, in these works, is to provide a voice to the 'non-objective chronicler of contemporary Northeastern reality'.

The Northeastern region of India connected to the rest of the country through the "Chicken's Neck" corridor has Tibet, Bhutan, Myanmar, and China as its neighbors. This geographical context contributes to the region's portrayal as unique, diverse, and often problematic. However, literature written by Dai goes beyond the regional issue, as it has a universal character that connects with audiences at home and abroad. Northeastern literature deals with the concepts of the nation, identity, insurgency, and violence as well as the home and the aspects of displacement, and in the process, it tackles the themes of colonialism and the role of oral traditions. Contrary to the stereotypical visions, Dai believes literature from the region to be the representation of optimism. She counters the monolithic and abstract portrayal of homogenization to represent the dignity and the intricacies of the community's culture. With other indigenous writers, she aims to counter the colonial conceptualization of the traditional way of life as "primitive" and the modern way as "civilized". Literature in the form of a counter narrative, in which she articulates the closeness of the people to the land, is primarily what differentiates her from others.

### **Bioregional Narrativity and the Spiritual Ecology of Place**

One of the most useful frameworks of exploration for Dai's fiction is bioregionalism, the understanding of human identity as the engagement and cohabitation with a multitude of other natural beings of a defined geographical and ecological zone. This understanding is summed up with the Adi term Pensam, which translates to 'in-between'.

Pensam means the 'in-between' of the phenomena and the spiritual, the reason and the faith, the myth and the real. This 'liminal space' has been described by some as the 'hidden spaces of the heart where a secret garden grows'. This concept of in-betweenness is a reflection of the archetypal position of the Adi, caught between their centuries-old customs and the realities of modernization. The concept of Pensam, as a symbolic space, is aptly captured in *The Legends of Pensam*, which is a collection of interrelated tales of folklore, memoir, and history that recount the 'transitory phase between the traditional and the modern ways of their life'. The book itself is non-linear, a reflection of the indigenous view on reality and a testimony to the multiple, non-linear continuum of cultural knowledge.

Dai is profoundly impacted by the animistic faith of the Adis, which is centered on 'forest ecology and co-existence with the natural world'. In her worldview, nature is seen as 'attentive and sacred' rather than passive. Hiloidari, Pori points out, 'very attuned to the

spirit of the place and the natural world 'A living presence'. Donyi-Polo the foundational sacred concept refers to the Sun (Donyi) and the Moon (Polo). Donyi-Polo is the physical embodiment of a high god or 'world spirit'. Donyi-Polo is the unseen essence that steers all creatures and on which all life forms are mutually empathetic to one another; and, as a strong proponent of equality, Donyi-Polo illuminates all life. It is the philosophy of Donyi-Poloism that most parallels to Deep Ecology, as it supports the biocentric principle of the inherent value of all life forms and of the maintenance of balance within the ecosystem.

There is also the sentiment that every element of the landscape is alive: 'everything is sacred. Rocks and stones, trees and rivers, hills and all that live – everything is sacred.' In this land people are expected to take only what they need to survive and nothing more out of greed, and as such, the land is seen as a mother, and people, its children. Nature as Moral Agent: Nature is seen as a moral agent and is considered a shaper of the destiny of the people. The ostrich, Biribik, is a culprit of tragedy and it becomes a vessel of evils that forewarn destruction. Nature is seen to have the soothe, and heal.

### **Eco-critical and Eco-feminist Dimensions**

The novel reveals a conscious awareness of the damage of modernity and modernisation on the ecosystem and the environment in the ecosystem. Dai's text inspires eco-feminist interpretations, which emphasizes the 'exploitation of both women and nature and the various structures of patriarchal and colonial oppression.' Female characters, who are primarily identified with domesticity and nurturing (cooking, resource gathering and children caring), are relieved and liberated from the overused forest, which becomes a site for therapy. Male-destructive activities, such as hunting (the cultural myth 'Man the Hunter') and over-development, are juxtaposed with the oppression of women, who used domestic slaves and assigned children to reproductive work, which are less valued to the dominant men. Nenem's land devotion, even if and when it means sacrificing her love, reflects this profound bond which is a metaphor for the woman's sacrifice for her cultural heritage.

### **Oral Tradition, Memory, and Epistemic Sovereignty**

Dai's commitment to the recounting of the indigenous experience necessitates the translation and recognition of the rich oral tradition of the Adi tribe which colonially imposed literacy. All of Arunachal Pradesh's indigenous communities such as the Adi tribe also have a non-script language as well as an oral tradition. These forms of communication are the important means through which knowledge and history, and identity of the community are stored. Adi Tribe traditionally called the epic tales Aabang and these were recited by Miri, an Adi Tribe shaman, historian, and ethno mythologist. Christian missionaries and colonial administrators were the first to introduce colonial rule, literacy, and print culture to the Adi people. The dominant chirographic culture led to the view that oral cultures were primitive, uncivilized, and fundamentally inferior. This was the first of

many challenges faced by the Adi people, who assumed that the absence of a writing system represented a "lack".

Dai's work also called writing orality' attempts to resist this epistemic violence. Dai breathes life into these tales, preserves the rituals, wisdom, and stories of lost civilizations, and transforms them into modern literary English so that they may survive contemporary culture. Her writing, memory, and imagination are directly influenced by the myths of these cultures, and like them, she views these narratives as containing life-affirming symbols of humanity.

One of the most profound of Dai's assertions of Indigenous scholarship is illustrated by the idea of 'terristory'(a blend of 'territory' and 'story'), expressing the inseparable relationship between place and narrative. In this context, the land is not simply illustrated by stories; the land 'speaks' through narrative. For the Mishmi chief Kajinsha, the land is supreme: 'The Tibetan Lamas have books and you read your book for knowledge of God. We read the land. The land is our book. Everything here on the hill, the grass and rocks and stones is saying something.' This practice of land reading is an Indigenous epistemology articulated in counter to the written supremacy of the colonial priest.

The concept of 'terristory' emphasizes the physicality of oral traditions that are etched in the environment. For example, specific geographies, such as a certain rock formation, trigger the recollection of specific mythology, like the bird spirit abducting the girl, thus the rock serves as a mnemonic marker of the myth. Collapse of Time: Dai's narratives often merge the construct of mythical time and historical time. In 'Black Hill', specific events where Kajinsha mythologically kills a serpent spirit of revenge, thus killing one of Gimur's twins, diverges from the recount of historical events. It also exemplifies interspecies reckoning and the disruption of the sacred order in indigenous cosmology.

The assertion of terristory by Dai connects with the current situation of the Idu Mishmi (Adi sub-tribe) community, whose opposition to the proposed tiger reserve is based on the Idu-tiger brotherhood mythology, where the tiger is viewed as a relative, thus providing a cultural rationale for the land's non-occupation, contradicting other conservationist narratives.

### **Cultural Memory and Trauma**

Memory is a vault of the past and is important for cultural identity. Dai constructs counter-memory through the use of memory and narrative storytelling, as dominant narratives (especially political and colonial) try to erase and marginalize the indigenous past. The collective experience of colonization, war, forced displacement, and the loss of culture is what historians call trauma, and it gets transmitted through generations. Precisely, Dai's novels portray characters who, like the fictional characters of the novels do, wrestle with these trauma with the challenge of the past, and struggle with a hollow or

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unstable present.

The characters often tell of the experience of loss and the absence of values. Hoxo recalls the loss which modernity has brought with it, such as the great trees which housed the ancestral spirits, and the loss of the "canopy of shelter and tradition" which has now fallen. The result of such a loss is the cultural anxiety, which has a large correlation with the preservation of authenticity. Though trauma exists, the memory itself provides a means to restore what has been lost. According to Thayer Jr. nothing is "ended" but rather "changed" which makes memory a "changed shape" and so is transcendental. Restorative storytelling is aimed at revamping the existence of indigenous life.

The Legends of Pensam (2006) contains four chapters, each covering a section of the Adi society's chronological evolution from a primitive mythical epoch to modernity. The chapters incorporate sub-tales and non-sequential order for a deliberate purpose, reflective of the character of Pensam as fluid and unconsolidated. The events described in the chapters do not feature one main character but center the entire community. This was intended to reflect the collective consciousness of the community. Spirits, especially Biribik, and the miri (a rhapsodist/shaman) who keeps the community's history and ritually heals and placates spirits, are the most active.

In the stories, the ties between clans were often illustrated, and how these connections, and other links, were explained by elders in the following manner: "everything is interconnected. Sometimes a connection is born in the middle of war. Sometimes it is through a woman, sometimes land, and sometimes it is through an object out of the past". This net of relationships is a source of support in crises. The book captures the first wave of colonization (the migluns) and the construction of The Stillwell Road. The road represented the advancing change, the kind of change that introduced modernity of the West, Christianity, and self-individualization, which were in stark contrast to the communal relationships that existed. The younger generations, Arsi in particular, were deeply anxious, unsatisfied with the old ways, and desired a new life in which they could "Speak English". Nenem Nenem is the river woman and symbolizes the deep ties women share with nature; she represents the deep flowing and unpredictable essence of the river. Nenem's love story with the British officer David is also a representation of the love-hate relations of that period. When David left, Nenem didn't leave the country. She chose her roots and famous said, "No one dies of love. I loved him, and now I am enough on my own". She is said to have died because of a natural disaster, which is a representation of the "pangs of transition from one way of life to another". She was from the country and the natural people of that country, and not to have them would also be fatal to her spirit.

It attempts to integrate the present-day political concerns such as insurgency, corruption, and election with the history and indigenous cultural elements. The novel captures the fragmentation of the Adi lifeworld (Lebenswelt) the world as given in

condition, particularly with an animistic and deep communal attachment to the land and its roots in ecocentric principles. The life world is also, however, challenged as the state is perceived as a geopolitical 'security concern', with violence, corruption, and militancy on the rise. There is political dialogue but it is despondent, unconstructive, and devoid of genuine interest in the welfare of the populace.

This also reflects the impact of 'cultural modernity' (urbanization, rapid commerce technology) and settler colonialism. The loss of cultural values is illustrated by the deliberate felling of big trees for timber whereby ancestral spirits are rendered 'homeless'. The 'terrible road' has unregulated theories: modernity, urban illness, disease, thieves, and outsiders, and the deterioration of traditional communal harmony.

With regards to Bioregionalism, Lutor, a contestant in the elections, advocates for a land-centred, ecologically bounded, political orientation. Lutor seeks to promote the bioregional consciousness of the Adi by reminding them of their deep and abiding connection to the earth: "People love their land. It is life, it is birth, it is joy and children. It is the symb of our power and our inspiration. It is life". Maying, the narrator, who at the time was focusing on setting up a Biodiversity office, comes to realise, as the ecopolitics theory posits, that social issues must be resolved before any ecological reforms.

The novel painstakingly retrieves cultural pasts starting with Arunachal as a preliterate society with an oral memoria. It writes about Adi's origin myth, Kojum-Koja, as the "first civilization where humanity's journey began", a "sacred place beyond the moon and stars". The novel's shamans, including the Rainman, who could transform into a tiger or make a barren stone weep, affirm the cultural belief in animism and the spirit world.

### **The Dynamic and Resilient Identity**

The focus on Mamang Dai's works and her literature as an complete advocacy on the Adi is a testimony to the integration of indigenous philosophy and ecology and postcolonial struggle. In corroborating Stuart Hall's theory, the Adi identity as portrayed by Dai is not a straightforward essence, but a complex in a constant flow, as shaped by various historic continuities and disruptions. Adis, through hybridization and ambivalence, a cultural self-reinvention, defies any trail of closure or confinement in a rigid, stereotypical depiction. Dai validates the oral narratives and the concept of territory, thus granting the indigenous community the right of self-representation and self-determination. The idea that they "read the land" becomes an effective counter to Western reasoning and encounter with history.

The Adi ethos built on Pensam and the Donyi-Polo rests on a solid eco-spirituality that sees nature as sacred kin to be respected and reciprocated to. In the novels, the conflicts arise from the violation of this sacred balance between humans and nature due to colonial exploitation and unbridled modernity. Dai's narrative, despite the historical traumas, violence, and cultural anxiety of the community, brings a message of hope. With

change coming, there is a “moment of great possibilities,” suggesting that the way forward is a blend of cultural wisdom with new realities, deep rootedness, and land reconciliation. Transcribing oral history ensures that “lives are ended,” the stories, and hence the cultural identity, “never” die. The analysis indicates that Adi identity is based in a spiritual ecology called Donyi-Polo (Sun-Moon), which complies with the concepts of Deep Ecology by stating the intrinsic worth and sacredness of any kind of life. An important discovery is the claim of "territory" a combination of territory and narrative, in which the actual land serves as a book of knowledge, in response to the epistemic violence of colonial literacy. . The study shows that the novel is an expression of epistemic sovereignty in which the landscape is a sign of cultural myths in the form of a mnemonic. Finally, the research concludes that Adi identity is dynamic and resilient and uses hybridization to close the divide between an animistic past and modern aspirations.

### Conclusion

Mamang Dai changed the way the world views Arunachal Pradesh, the state on the Northeastern fringe of India. By depicting the state's landscapes and Indigenous lives, and using them to write a narrative that demands cultural recognition and ecological justice, she's created a narrative that provoked the world to pay attention to Arunachal. Her narratives “seam” together the people's existence, the lives of the people “past, present and future”, and the Arunachal landscape to form a masterpiece that has survived the test of time.

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