

Retrieving the Ethnic World of the Adis: An Ecocritical Reading of Mamang Dai's *The Legends of Pensam*

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Abstract

Northeast India is the home to different ethnic groups with a variety of cultures, languages, religions and is regarded as the melting pot of diverse races, castes, and cultures. It is one of the most under-represented regions of India. The troubled political atmosphere, the scenic landscape, and the confluence of various ethnic groups in the region perhaps have given rise to a body of literary writings that is entirely different from the rest of India. Like the region itself, literature in English from the Northeastern part of India has also been stereotyped. But if we make a critical study at the literary writings of this region, we will find that most of the authors such as Mamang Dai, Temsula Aao, Aruni Kashyap, Easterine Kire are consciously incorporating the geopolitical and environmental issues like the ecological degradation of the region, the exploitation of resources, radical climate change of the land, deforestation, encroachment, poaching, etc. in their writings. For instance, Mamang Dai's *The Legends of Pensam* is a novel that has a strong ecological concern. History, myth, tradition, memory, and fiction merge together in this novel, which showcases the unique ecology of Arunachal Pradesh. The clash between tradition and modernity and the degeneration of traditional values during the colonial period as well as the ecological degradation of the land can well be studied from an ecological viewpoint. The novel advocates the restoration of the age-old bond between man and the nature as a way of retaining the identity of the tribal communities in the contemporary world of globalization and modernization.

Keywords: Literature in English from Northeast India, tribal community, ethnic groups, environmental degradation, ecology, environment, ecocriticism.

The Northeast region of India is often viewed by most of the Indians as a conflict-ridden zone with problems related to identity, violence, ethnic strife, infiltrations, militancy, and so on. This stereotyped view of the region is also reflected in the literature in English from Northeast India. However, these issues are not the ultimate defining themes of the writings from this region. The rich cultural heritage of various ethnic groups, the beautiful natural landscape, and the troubled political atmosphere of the region have collectively contributed

to the emergence of a kind of writing which is different from the mainland narratives in many ways. If we look at the English writings from Northeast India, we will find that the writers of this region are deeply concerned with important contemporary issues like environmental degradation, climate change, deforestation, etc. Noted writers such as Mamang Dai, Aruni Kashyap, Temsula Ao, Easterine Kire, Robin S Ngangom, Kynpham Sing Nongkynrih, and others have addressed through their writings issues of ecology and environmental degradation of the region. Mamang Dai, a noted poet, journalist, and a former civil servant of Arunachal Pradesh beautifully depicts the myths, folktales, legends, history, ethnic life and the evolution of the Adis at present in her fiction *The Legends of Pensam*(2006). Dai, being a true native of the land, brings in this novel her personal knowledge about the Adis of the Siang valley of Arunachal Pradesh. Through the stories in *The Legends of Pensam*, Dai vividly portrays the relation of the Adi tribe with the natural world with a respectful outlook towards their primitive customs, beliefs, and legends. The ‘Adi’ tribe is one of the ethnic sub-groups of the Tani people living in various districts of Arunachal Pradesh such as East Siang, West Siang, Upper Siang, Lower Dibang Valley, and Lohit Namsai. Dai’s effort through this fiction is to blow out the old dust of ‘stereotype’ set for this region by narrating the simple, harmonious stories of the oblivious ethnic group living in the wild, lushful and green Siang valley of Arunachal Pradesh, a place famous for its biodiversity hotspots with wide range of flora and fauna. But the post-independent scenario of the land has undergone drastic changes- both environmental and socio-political. This changed scenario of the region has caught the attention of Dai’s fiction, and her present novel rightly highlights the troubles that the Adis in this region are facing while trying to remodel their lives for existence against all the odds. Tillotoma Misra in the ‘Introduction’ of her critical anthology *The Oxford Anthology of Writings from North-East India* has talked about this precarious condition of the Adis in today’s globalized world. She expresses her deep concern for the people of the Adi tribe who, in the face of modernization and globalization, are forced to alter their way of life “according to the demand of the changing times” (Misra, xviii).

As Mamang Dai herself belongs to the Adi community, she has naturally the firsthand experiences of the age-old customs and the belief system of the Adis as well as their legends, myths, and fables. Kailash C. Baral, in his critical essay “Articulating Marginality: Emerging Literatures from Northeast India”, refers Dai as the ‘cultural historian’ as her fiction “provides us the resource from which we can glean the history of the Adis” (Baral, 8). Dai, in one of her interviews, published in *The Hindu*, declares that her prime intention behind writing this is to “protect and preserve the heritage and legacy of these tales.” She further expresses:

Ours is an oral tradition you know, I was trying to meet people and collect and record these oral narratives. The small histories which were getting lost

and when you talk to people even small things can trigger these memories off.

She attains this in *The Legends of Pensam* by merging the tradition and primordial customs with the history and myths of the community and by employing her unique narrative style. The novel contains nineteen stories, which are incorporated into four sections titled “a diary of the world”, “songs of the rhapsodist”, “daughters of the village”, and “a matter of time” respectively. This work of fiction picturizes the evolving process of the Adis from their primitive society towards the modern one and shows how these people lament the loss of their tradition, ethnic life world, and simultaneously try hard to cope up with the present deteriorating environment. Gunjana Dey’s article “Writing for an Endangered Nature and Culture: An Ecocritical Reading of Mamang Dai’s *The Legends of Pensam*” echoes the same critical situation:

...[t]hese stories are spread across a few generations of a family as a result of which the same characters reappear in most of the tales, giving the book a more or less novel-like structure. Traditional tribal beliefs form the nucleus of the lives of the characters in this book; spirits, shamans and unnatural events influence their lives in more ways than one. This intricate web of stories gradually unfolds into the history of a tribe. This book is an intermingling of myth and history of the tribe of Adis of the Siang valley...
(76)

The society of the Adi community is primarily based on animism and supernatural belief. This belief system is deeply rooted in the ecology of the land, and in their belief system, the ‘shamans’ engage themselves in conversation with the spirits. *The Legends of Pensam* thus pictures the world of the Adis based on their co-existence with the natural and the supernatural worlds. The existing infrastructural and developmental projects of the Government to connect the land of the Adis with the outside world are not only impinging on the ecological balance and the environment of the land but also gradually putting an end to their traditional ways of living. Therefore, this paper seeks to analyze from an ecocritical perspective how globalization, urbanization as well as modern developmental projects undertaken by the Governments are rapidly changing and simultaneously ruining the tradition, culture, belief system of the Adis as well as the biodiversity and the ecological balance of the Siang valley of Arunachal Pradesh. The present paper will also try to find out how the land of the Adi tribe in Arunachal Pradesh becomes a site of clash of two dominant cultures- one being the modern Indic culture and the other the traditional one of the Adi tribe. Dai, through the nineteen - stories of *The Legends of Pensam*, is trying to rediscover and retrieve the rich cultural heritage and myths of the Adis. This retrieving of the past by narrating the legends of the Adi tribe is a kind of protest against the authority.

Arunachal Pradesh is acknowledged as one of the major ‘biodiversity hotspots’ of India as well as the world for its wide variety of flora and fauna. In addition to its flora and fauna, this Northeastern state is inhabited by a variety of tribal communities along its valleys and highlands. The tribe of Adi belongs to one of these communities, and the people of this community are living in complete sync with nature. They practice the traditional way of living depending solely on nature and without hampering the ecological balance of the region. But the present scenario of Arunachal Pradesh has become a site of rapid changes. The socio-economic, political, and environmental changes of this state have wrecked havoc upon the traditional lifestyle and belief system of the Adis, which in earlier were in rapport with pristine nature. In recent times the ecology of the land inhabited by tribal people like the Adis has been brought to the limelight by academia worldwide, and the degradation of the ecosystem caused by modern technological aggression is being viewed with great concern by the ecological discourses. The main concern of ecological studies is the deteriorating environment, ecological imbalance, and its direct impact upon human civilization. A number of discourses ranging from ecological studies to ecocriticism have put to question this co-existence of the human world with the natural world. Therefore, Dai’s novel *The Legends of Pensam*, which is set in the tribal region of the Siang Valley, can well be analyzed through the lens of ecocriticism. Ecocriticism mainly tries to analyze any literary work in terms of its connection with the environment. It examines the representation of the environment and nature in literary and cultural texts. Glotfelty, in the ‘Introduction’ to *The Ecocriticism Reader: Landmarks in Literary Ecology*, states “ecocriticism takes an earth-centred approach to literary studies” and defines ecocriticism as “the study of the relationship between literature and the physical environment” (xviii). Chingangbam Anupama, in her scholarly essay “An Ecocritical Approach: A Study of Selected North East Indian Poets,” points out that “ecocriticism deals with the expression of judgment upon the writings which marks the relation between nature and man or effects of culture on nature.” (www.the-criterion.com). Prof. Thomas K Dean of the University of Iowa includes culture in ecocriticism and says:

Eco-criticism is a study of culture and cultural products (art works, writings, scientific theories, etc.) that is in some way connected with human relationship to the natural world. (www.asle.org)

But a mere representation of the natural world and the environment in the literary texts is not the only concern of ecocriticism. Lawrence Buell, in his famous work *The Environmental Imagination: Thoreau, Nature Writing, and the Formation of American Culture*, differentiates between ‘nature writing’ and ‘environment writing’ wherein the former ‘nature’ is just a mere reflection of the natural elements but the later is associated with the environment. Buell, in this book, defines “ecocriticism’...as [a] study of the relationship between literature and the environment conducted in a spirit of commitment

to environment praxis” (Buell, 430). He has pointed out a few important criteria for evaluating a text that can be called ecocritical writing. He proposes that in a literary text, the non-human world must be presented as a ‘real’ one and should not be a mere facade. Second, the representation of human interest should not be the only reasonable interest. Third, nature must not be pictured as mere background but rather a continual process. Fourth, a literary text must reflect its accountability towards the environment. (Buell, 7-8). If we make an indepth analysis of Dai’s *The Legends of Pensam* keeping in mind Buell’s concept of an ecocritical text mentioned here, we will find at the end that the texture of the novel is thematically interwoven with the mutually interactive spaces of the humans and nature.

Both thematically and technically, the narration and the narrative structure of Dai’s *The Legends of Pensam* are worth reading from an ecocritical perspective. This paper will try to find out how the social, economic, political, and developmental changes in the land have affected the life of the Adis and how they have reacted against these changes. The opening section of Dai’s novel titled “a diary of the world” depicts ‘pensam’, the abode of the Adi tribe. In the Adi language, ‘pensam’ means an ‘in-between’ place where anything can happen at any time. Dai declares:

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

Both literally and figuratively, Pensam is the ‘in-between’ place between myth and reality, tradition and modernity “where anything can happen and everything can be lived.” The Adis live perfectly well in their sacred abode with their culture, rituals, customs, myths, belief system, which create a shield to save their environment from any outside influences. Dai, in *The Legends of Pensam*, attempts to show the collective consciousness and the shared memory of the Adi tribe through discovering their belief system, myths, and love for their land. The Adis regard their habitat in the forest as their true identity and their consciousness. In most of the passages of the fiction, readers will find the geographical descriptions and the forest, which is the sacred abode of the Adis. In the opening section, Dai describes the greenery of the land as “the colour of escape and solitude” (8), which suggests a unique bond between the Adis and the natural world. This relation of the human world with the natural world finds its ecocritical implications in Dai’s novel in a way that reminds us of the definition of ecocriticism provided by Glotfelty. With the progress of

the narration, the reader gradually discovers that this peaceful, harmonious relationship and co-existence of the Adis with nature have greatly been ruptured by the post-independent developmental projects. This paper will thoroughly examine this motif of change through the perspective of ecocriticism.

The imagery in Dai's novel highlights a juxtaposition of two different worldviews of the Adis. Regarding the imagery, Anindya Syam Choudhury and Debashree Chakraborty in their article "The Representation of the Ethnic Life-World of the Adis in Mamang Dai's *The Legends of Pensam: An Ecocritical Reading*" mention:

On the one hand, the visuals are suggestive of the bounty of nature, of the dense foliage in the midst of which the Adis live a secured life oblivious to the ways of the world outside their territory, and on the other, there are stark visuals which highlight the grim situation of things going wrong in their cultural milieu owing to the exchanges with the world that is remote and different, a world which does not understand the simplicity of living in close proximity of a natural cover, and is rather thoroughly imposing and alluring.(44)

The imagery, therefore, in the beginning, serves as a background setting of the pristine, unpolluted nature, along with a tone of remorse. The description of the river which cuts through the green Siang valley is one such visual description:

The river cuts through our land as before in its long journey to the sea. In spring the red flowers still blaze against our sky. But the old people now, the few of them alive, turn slowly in their sleep as the fires burn down to a heap of ash. In the middle of the night a bird swoops low and calls out in a wild, staccato note. The thatch rustles. The bamboo creaks. The darkness is full of breath and sighs. The rain comes gently, bathing the night. (4)

The narrator describes the natural phenomenon in a visionary way. Dai has used natural elements like the rivers, mountains, animals, forest in a metaphoric way to assert the identity of the Adis. Dai describes the beauty of the rain succinctly:

Every day I saw clouds dropping lower and lower like ominous waves. The hills were blue, their outline rimmed in black, and the trees were still. Soon, the first fat beads of water would tear the giant leaves of wild yam. Then fierce, hissing rain would cover the land like the sea...It rains during the day, it rains all night. It can rain non-stop for sixty-two das at a time. Not a peep of sunshine. Not a breath of wind. Every summer the tangled undergrowth clinging to the hills is swept away by the downpour, causing landslides that cut off all communication and links. (36-37)

In the last few lines of the quote, 'rain' is personified. The description of the rain with its consequences in the line that follows portrays the beauty of rain after summer and its effect on the vibrancy of the wildlife in that region. It shows the eternal relationship between the living and the non-living world. The close affinity between these two worlds is vividly reflected in the ethnic life of the Adis. The Adis show their love, reverence, and fear for this non-human world without hampering the ecological balance. Nature is an integral part of the cultural life of the Adis. This sustainable association with nature is a part of the recurrent imagery throughout *The Legends of Pensam*. The following passage reflects the reverence to nature of the Adis:

Every winter, men from the surrounding villages perched on the highest ridges set out on a journey to the snow-mountains to harvest a precious root. This is the deadly aconitum that is collected for the preparation of poison arrows. No one remembers for how long this annual trek has been a ritual. But there are many stories associated with the excursion, most of them narrated with disbelief by the travellers themselves who say they were lucky to return alive, back from the realm of silent waste and hallucinations. (58)

Here nature is personified as a divine spirit who needs to be satisfied with offerings and prayers. Having faith in 'animism', the Adis hold natural elements as sacred and have deep reverence. They live a secured life amidst nature and thrive upon it. The Adis take from nature what is required and nothing more without rupturing their ecology.

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

But it wasn't as if change hadn't touched our land, or had come only recently. The first white priests, surveyors and soldiers had begun arriving in the region almost hundred years ago, in the early 1800s. Since then, people from other worlds had come and gone, though the only records of their journeys are the stories that the older men and women remember. (37-8)

Dai applies the flashback technique while telling the stories. The opening section, "a diary of the world," begins with the introduction of Hoxo, 'the wonder boy who fell from the sky.'

Hoxo was found by his foster father Lutor, the leader of the Adis, while working in the construction site. Lutor and his friend carried the boy to the village, and everyone believed their story how they found the boy without asking any question. It was Lutor who first narrates the wind of change in the region by uttering “it was already a confused and haunted time of change when Hoxo was found.” This section also brings light to Hoxo’s friend Rakut. Both of them give the readers an insight into the life of the Adis and the change they encounter and experience through their life as the omniscient narrator describes, “Here Hoxo and Rakut live and remember on a piece of green earth wedged between high mountains and big rivers” (190). Dai’s unique and fascinating narrative technique presents these two friends from the very beginning to the end as experiencing the metamorphosed world minutely. They experience the best of their world alongside the current of change, which robbed them of their pristine world as well as their identity. So when the elder members of the Adis were grieving the situation, Hoxo and Rakut maintain an objective distance. This objective approach of Hoxo is seen in the novel where Hoxo is spending time with an antique pair of binoculars with his granddaughter.

While the first section is filled with the description of the lush green Siang valley of Arunachal Pradesh, the concluding section titled “a matter of time” stands in stark contrast with such plenty. This section documents the change that swept the green valley in the form of progress and ‘development’ in post-independent India. Like other parts of India, the scenario of this region changes rapidly after independence. The tribal belts of Arunachal Pradesh also become a part of the developmental projects of the newly formed Government. After independence, the Government’s approach to the tribals changed radically. Earlier it was decided to maintain a ‘status quo’ and ‘isolation policy’ for the tribals of India. But this approach was firmly replaced by a ‘policy of development, progress, and integration.’ Noted anthropologist Prof. A.C. Bhagawati in a lecture “Ethnic Identities in North-east India. N.K.Bose Memorial Lectures” states that “the post-independent period saw acceleration in the field of social change and modernization of various tribal groups and their effective induction within the framework of the nation-state.”

Adis had already experienced the touch of the outside world first through the hands of the British during the construction of the road and later through the infrastructural projects of the Government of India. As a consequence, in the present scenario, business and tourism expand in and around the land of the Adis. The calm and secured abode of the Adis, their green valley, the forest, etc., got permanently thwarted in the face of the changes which followed the land. The greenery of the region gradually transforms into small towns, offices, schools, hotels, and tourist spots. The green topography of Siang valley turned into dust and debris. Dai sketches this deplorable condition of the green valley through the terrible description of Gurдум town:

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

The towns of Gurдум and Pigo are the completely different worlds from the lush greenery of the Siang valley. It is not only the onslaught of modernization, globalization, and consumerism which are polluting the region but also the migrated workmen from the Northern part of India with 'dark savage eyes' that are making the difference. This 'pollution' is not only harming the ecological balances of the land but also deteriorating the social, ethical, and moral fabric of the Adis:

The texture and speed of change was visible in strange ways all across the land. A visitor coming to the town for the first time would still see the green hills, the green bamboo and the green river flowing in all directions, but now there were young men on motorcycles roaring across the stones while young picknickers wearing fake fur and woollen caps waved at passers-by. In the run up to the volleyball tourney this year, I heard that the Motum village team had been disqualified because one of their players tried to play holding a bottle of beer in one hand. (188)

The close observation related to the life of the Adis in the above quotation shows not only the various changes in the environment but also the collapse of their moral values. The entire final section of *The Legends of Pensam* records all these changes and divulges the disturbing reality and the painful condition of the Adis. As Dai registers:

His wide, fresh face broke into a smile and I understood that because Kasup had travelled to the city recently his head had been completely turned by the sights, sounds and smells of the other life. The representatives sent to the National Development Council for Backward Areas had been thoroughly overwhelmed by the sea of people, the lights and the roar of traffic and they had returned triumphant, as if they had learnt the secret of modern life. (170)

Undoubtedly, it was very difficult for the Adis to abstain themselves from the temptations of modern life. However, when such an obsession preoccupied the soul of the people who are originally connected to nature, it becomes alarming. This perception can be explained through the interpretation of a debate between the 'Cornucopians' and the 'Environmentalist' as postulated by Greg Garrard in his famous book *Ecocriticism*. The 'Cornucopians' believe that natural dangers due to human advancement and the perils that follow are all misrepresented and fanciful and that there are enough resources on the earth for the future generations. On the contrary, the 'Environmentalists' are worried about the

ecological changes and, at the same time, wish to improve human life without accepting drastic changes in society. If the Adis accept this 'Cornucopians' way of life, forgetting their traditional lifestyle and worldview, it will be much more dangerous than the apparent environmental changes. The narrator, therefore, reminds the Adis to keep their 'Environmentalist' trait intact amidst ecological interferences.

In conclusion, it must be admitted that nature has been treated as a 'living entity' in a significant portion of Dai's *The Legends of Pensam*. It is not her intention to present nature as mere background in her fiction. Instead, she represents nature in an objective way. It is "blooming and burgeoning at times, ruthless in the face of transgression". Keeping in mind the Adis' view of nature, Dai restrains herself from presenting nature as divine and godlike. Rather, nature turns out to be a "tooth and claw" affair to them (Dey, 80). So a proper study of *The Legends of Pensam* focuses on a society that could "serve as an ideal ecocritical model" (Chowdhury & Chakraborty, 51). The Adis unblemished or unspoiled society exhibits an ideal space of an 'ecotopia' where living and the non-living elements would live and communicate with peaceful cohabitation.

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