

Mamang Dai's *The Legends of Pensam*: A Study of Cultural Identity and Decolonization

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Abstract

Mamang Dai's *The Legends of Pensam* (2006), a seminal work of Northeast Indian literature, intricately weaves myth, history, and oral traditions to portray the cultural ethos of the Adi tribe in Arunachal Pradesh. This research paper examines how Dai employs narrative strategies to preserve and revitalize Adi identity, focusing on themes of cultural liminality, gendered subalternity, and decolonization. Through an ecocritical and postcolonial lens, the paper analyzes the text's depiction of the Adi community's coexistence with nature, their negotiation of tradition and modernity, and the resilience of marginalized voices, particularly women. Drawing on scholarly sources, the study highlights Dai's contribution to documenting indigenous epistemologies and challenging Eurocentric narratives.

Keywords: Adi tribe, Culture, Identity, Decolonization, Ecocriticism

1. Introduction

Mamang Dai, a poet, novelist, and former journalist from the Adi tribe of Arunachal Pradesh, is a leading voice in Northeast Indian literature. Her novel *The Legends of Pensam* (2006) is a tapestry of interconnected stories that capture the daily lives, beliefs, and struggles of the Adi people in the Siang Valley. The title "Pensam," meaning "in-between," reflects the liminal space between myth and reality, tradition and modernity, and the village and the town (Dai, 2006). This paper explores how Dai's work serves as an act of cultural preservation and decolonization, foregrounding the Adi tribe's animistic worldview, ecological consciousness, and gendered experiences. By integrating postcolonial, ecocritical, and feminist perspectives, the study underscores the novel's significance in amplifying marginalized voices and re-presenting indigenous narratives.

The analysis draws on postcolonial theory, particularly John Quintero's concept of decolonization as the exercise of self-determination, which prioritizes the recovery of indigenous epistemologies over mere political independence (Sinha, 2020). Edward Soja's notion of "thirdspace" informs the exploration of liminality, as *Pensam* represents a hybrid space where cultural identities are negotiated (Soja, 1996). Ecocriticism, including tropes like deep ecology and ecofeminism, frames the Adi's symbiotic relationship with nature (Glottfelty & Fromm, 1996). Additionally, Gayatri Spivak's concept of the subaltern highlights the silenced voices of indigenous women, whose agency Dai seeks to restore (Spivak, 1988).

Cultural Identity and Oral Tradition

The Legends of Pensam is deeply rooted in the Adi tribe's oral tradition, which Dai employs to preserve cultural memory and assert epistemic agency. The novel's structure, an "intricate web of stories" interconnected across generations, mirrors the fluidity of oral narratives (Dai, 2006). Characters like Hoxo, a boy who "fell from the sky," and the shaman embody the Adi's animistic faith, which perceives spirits in forests and rivers (Fryer, 2015). Dai's lyrical prose, described as evocative of Ruskin Bond and William Dalrymple, captures the Siang Valley's landscape, blending myth with reality to create a "small world where anything can happen" (Dai, 2006;).

Dai's use of autoethnography, as noted by Samrita Sinha, allows her to reclaim Adi cultural enunciations, countering colonial erasure (Sinha, 2020). Stories of rituals, festivals, and daily practices—such as the Adi's reverence for Donyi Polo, their sun-moon deity—document a worldview that values coexistence with nature (Manjula & Mohanacharyulu, 2021). By recording these narratives, Dai ensures that the Adi's oral heritage, which lacks a written script, is preserved against the sweep of modernization.

Liminality and the Negotiation of Modernity

The concept of "Pensam" as an "in-between" space is central to the novel's exploration of cultural liminality. The Adi community navigates a transitional phase between tradition and modernity, myth and reality, and rural villages like Duyang and urbanizing towns like Pigo (Sarkar & Rai, 2022). This liminality is evident in stories like "The Coming of a Road," where infrastructure development brings new opportunities but threatens traditional ways (Dai, 2006). Dai portrays the Adi's resilience as they adapt to changes, such as colonial interventions and Christian influences, while guarding their animistic beliefs (Hazarika, 2019).

Edward Soja's "thirdspace" framework illuminates *Pensam* as a hybrid space where identities are neither fixed nor binary but constantly negotiated (Soja, 1996). For instance, characters like Mona, a modern-educated woman, straddle tribal traditions and urban aspirations, embodying the tension between past and present (Dumenil, 2019). Dai's depiction of this liminality challenges the reductive portrayal of Northeast India as a conflict-ridden region, instead foregrounding its polyethnic richness (Sinha, 2020).

Gendered Subalternity and Resistance

Dai's novel gives voice to the marginalized, particularly Adi women, who face intersecting oppressions from colonial legacies, patriarchal structures, and tribal customs. Stories like "The Words of Women" depict rural women laboring in the mountains, their struggles interwoven with folklore about supernatural beings like *miti mili* (Dai, 2006;). Aninnya Sarkar and Indrani Singh Rai argue that these women, as gendered subalterns, suffer in silence, restricted to "limited demarcated territory" yet quietly resist by sculpting their identities (Sarkar & Rai, 2022).

For example, the character Pinyar, a widow, navigates societal constraints to protect her son, embodying resilience despite her marginalized status (Dai, 2006). Dai's portrayal aligns with ecofeminist principles, linking women's oppression to the exploitation of nature, as both are integral to the Adi's animistic worldview (Glotsfelty & Fromm, 1996). By centering these narratives, Dai challenges the silencing of subaltern women, offering a platform for their survival complexities to reach broader audiences (Sarkar & Rai, 2022).

Ecocritical Perspectives

The Legends of Pensam presents an ecocritical model through the Adi's subsistence perspective, which emphasizes living within nature's limits rather than transcending it (Dumenil, 2017). Nature is a living entity in the novel, neither divine nor clandestine but a "tooth and claw" force that shapes Adi life (Dai, 2006). Stories highlight deep ecology, as the Adi's rituals and beliefs reflect a profound respect for the environment, from rivers to forests (Manjula & Mohanacharyulu, 2021).

Dai's ecofeminism connects the marginalization of women to environmental degradation, as both are affected by colonial and modern intrusions (Dumenil, 2017). For instance, the construction of roads disrupts the ecological and social fabric, paralleling the challenges faced by women like Pinyar (Dai, 2006). This perspective positions the Adi community as an ideal ecocritical model, advocating for sustainable coexistence.

Decolonization and Narrative Strategies

Dai's novel is a postcolonial act of decolonization, re-presenting Adi history and culture to subvert Eurocentric narratives. Samrita Sinha highlights Dai's use of autoethnography to revitalize displaced epistemologies, aligning with the United Nations' emphasis on cultural self-determination (Sinha, 2020;). By weaving myths, such as the tale of the rain mother, with historical events like British colonial expeditions, Dai constructs an alternative discourse that destabilizes hegemonic colonial plots (Manjula & Mohanacharyulu, 2021).

The novel's folkloristic elements, as explored by Dhruti Raval, enrich its cultural resonance, blending traditional motifs with contemporary storytelling (Raval, 2024). For instance, the story of Hoxo integrates animistic beliefs with colonial encounters, illustrating the Adi's adaptability (Dai, 2006). Dai's narrative strategy, rooted in oral tradition, preserves the "hidden spaces of the heart," ensuring that Adi culture remains vibrant amid modern pressures (Dumenil, 2019).

While *The Legends of Pensam* is celebrated for its lyrical depth, some critics note its lack of deep character development, which limits personal connection with readers. The novel's focus on collective memory over individual narratives may reflect the Adi's communal ethos but can feel fragmented to readers accustomed to linear plots (Kuman, 2015). Additionally, the romanticization of tribal life risks oversimplifying the complexities of modernization, a critique leveled at broader Northeast Indian literature (Bendix, 1997).

The novel's emphasis on cultural preservation also raises questions about accessibility, as its non-script Adi language and oral roots may limit its reach without translation (Dai, 2017). Nevertheless, Dai's work successfully bridges local and global audiences, as evidenced by its critical acclaim and inclusion in literary studies (Prodhani, 2022).

The Legends of Pensam remains vital in contemporary discussions of indigenous rights, environmental sustainability, and gender equity. Its ecocritical insights inform global movements for climate justice, as the Adi's subsistence perspective offers lessons in ecological balance (Dumenil, 2017). The novel's postcolonial agenda aligns with efforts to decolonize curricula, amplifying marginalized voices in Indian and global literature (Sinha, 2020).

Digital platforms, such as the Rupkatha Journal, have facilitated scholarly engagement with Dai's work, ensuring its accessibility to wider audiences. Furthermore, the novel's focus on women's resilience resonates with feminist movements advocating for indigenous women's rights, particularly in Northeast India (Sarkar & Rai, 2022).

Conclusion

Mamang Dai's *The Legends of Pensam* is a profound exploration of Adi cultural identity, weaving oral traditions, ecological consciousness, and gendered narratives into a decolonizing framework. Through its liminal "in-between" space, the novel captures the Adi tribe's negotiation of tradition and modernity, while amplifying the voices of marginalized women. Dai's lyrical prose and autoethnographic approach preserve indigenous epistemologies, challenging colonial legacies and Eurocentric narratives. Despite critiques of its narrative depth, the novel's ecocritical and postcolonial insights ensure its enduring relevance. As a testament to the human spirit, *The Legends of Pensam* invites readers to engage with the vibrant cultural tapestry of Northeast India.

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