

Legends of Pensam: Interrogating Ethnicity and Assimilation

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Abstract

Ethnicity engages in preserving a traditional identity as against the founding of a true and modern nation, which further lays claim to national identity and sovereignty. This paper seeks to identify the resistant discourse that Mamang Dai creates while narrating the history of Arunachal Pradesh and its smaller independent tribes and their struggle to retain their cultural identity and epistemic agency in her novel *The Legends OfPensam* (2006). The focus is on how the development process and the agenda of colonial modernity have tried to integrate and assimilate ethnic communities towards the mainstream at the cost of their specific descent, territory, language, history etc. It is this homogenizing tendency that this novel resists by creating an alternative discourse of celebration of the heterogeneity, cultural and economic specificities of the Adi people residing in the in-between ground of Pensam. The objective of the paper is to employ the theoretical concerns related to ethnic identity and ethnic consciousness to study the manner in which Mamang Dai reaffirms epistemic agency by celebrating both orality and peripherality.

Keywords: Adi people; Anthropocentric Epistemes; Epistemic agency; Ethnic identity; Orality.

Ethnicity is a term in wide circulation in contemporary literary and cultural studies. It has been “discursively constructed by regulatory practices that have functioned to assert certain ethnic *truths* that have been internalized and are continuously reproduced and performed in, through and by individual subjects who recount them as lived experiences” (Lapenta and Reich 3). In an opposing view Jose Medina recounts David A Hollinger’s postethnic perspective in his book *Postethnic America* where he mentions that “claiming cultural products and resources as one’s ethnic heritage is exclusionary because it denies access to these products and resour-

es to those who don't belong to the ethnic group" and this according to him should not be (Medina 93). However, the question that arises here is regarding the exclusive access to cultural products and resources that a group might have to forego without which the specificity of their origins and history might become immaterial. It is precisely because of the "exclusionary" nature of these resources that ethnic groups rejoice in their ethnic inheritance and derive pleasure from upholding them as their own. Medina in this context raises a pertinent question "And are the *full* enjoyment and the *responsible* use of these products and resources really possible without such an appreciation?" (Medina 94). Medina's question further raises doubt on the process of cultural assimilation of hill tribes into the larger framework of the Indian nation. Social anthropologist Thomas Hylland Eriksen in his book *Ethnicity and Nationalism: Anthropological Perspectives* writes that it has become abundantly clear that ethnicity often assumes political importance only from the moment discrete groups are integrated into a nation state.

It is only when a group comes into contact with other groups, do its members develop a sense of distinctiveness regarding their cultural products. Eriksen further writes "people become a *people* through awareness of differences vis-à-vis others" (Eriksen 103). With this in mind if one approaches Arunachal Pradesh which is one of the most distant and peripheral states of the Indian nation with very little cultural and historical links with the rest of the country, one confronts a population with a rich oral history, an insistence on preserving their tribal identity, resisting assimilation and absorption into a homogenised non-ethnic dominant framework. Dolly Kikon in her study on education and the process of colonial modernization among the Nagas began with a question "Have postcolonial nation-building processes been accommodative of the histories of peripheral regions?", the answer to which may be true even in the case of Arunachal Pradesh (Kikon 139). Peripheral regions have to preserve and nurture their own 'histories' in the form of tales orally transmitted and memory which is examined closely in Dai's novel.

I

Literature is one of the most valuable tools we possess for imagining life in other cultures (Carey 169). Mamang Dai's *The Legends of Pensam* focusses on the everyday practices of the people thereby problematizing the concepts of assimilation, identity and ethnicity as the tribes of Pensam

confront modernity, while at the same time desiring to preserve the traditional and indigenous ways of life with the help of collective memory and oral tales of the past. The paper while insisting on the durability of ethnic consciousness questions the universalizing Enlightenment discourse, which constructs Arunachal Pradesh as an exotic, mystic land full of superstitions and magical rituals.

The novel exposes the peripheral people to the mainlanders in a way questioning the acts of assimilation that nation formation brings with it, thereby exposing the hegemonic ideology of nationalism which may not sufficiently address the interests of each community and also raising doubts on Hollinger's postethnic stand as Medina rightly points out (Medina 94). Mamang Dai one of the renowned tribal voices from Arunachal Pradesh and Northeast India attempts to write back to the false construct regarding the tribal way of life through her novel *The Legends of Pensam*. Dai's fictional place Pensam too is a land where the daily lives of the people are governed by numerous stories, narratives, legends that make their lives special. The author, an Adi herself, mentions right at the beginning of the novel that in the language of the Adis, the word 'Pensam' means 'in-between'. Surrounded by superstitions on the one hand and ancient rituals on the other hand these mountain dwellers struggle against suppression and homogenization at times resorting to violence and related crimes but mostly depending on their specific rituals, and practices, their stories and legends, their memories of the past and the revelry of the present for their sustenance without.

Helen Appleton has noted that Western policy makers often viewed such societies as 'backward', 'static' and a 'hindrance' to modernization (Appleton et al. 211). According to Western policy makers, economic prosperity could only be acquired through scientific advancement. However, in this case then the rich indigenous knowledge that men and women (especially women) of such isolated ethnic groups possess would be considered unscientific, regressive and therefore something to be dismissed and ignored. Dai's novel counters this very discourse of advancement and modernity. While seeking to preserve the inner core of a community who were struggling to keep away the 'modern' and the 'new' she highlights the cultural differences under a universalizing Enlightenment discourse and the way the people living in Pensam resisted it. Her narrativization defrosts the fixed, cognitive framework of the form and shape of 'knowledge' thereby questioning the overarching structure of Eurocentric modernity. Pensam is a place where negotiations take place and people's lived experiences seek to render newer meanings to the very Western con-

cept of modernity thereby questioning its West-centric (ness). *The Legends of Pensam* offer an alternative discourse that leads to stories which allows us to rethink and scrutinize at different levels of understanding – one at the level of critiquing the given (the already existing discourse of West centric modernity) and the other at the level of experiencing the ‘new’ (the alternate discourse generated with the indigenous knowledge structure in view). A close reading of the novel reveals the emphasis Dai has given to epistemic agency which the inhabitants of Pensam can reclaim by celebrating their proximity to nature and the stories that have travelled from one generation to another.

II

In the first part of the novel called “a diary of the world” Hoxo the mysterious boy who fell from the sky, Rakut the ancient rhapsodist, Nenem and Pinyar the two courageous women who guard the community’s ancestral roots are characters who celebrate the vanishing way of life. Hoxo, the boy who fell from the sky was brought home in a basket by a man whose wife greeted him with love

She lifted him out of the basket. Even today Hoxo could not remember any happiness greater than the moment of that touch he had known more than half a century ago. Hoxo immediately sensed there were no other children in the house. He had no idea how old he was, no one said anything... (Dai 8).

Samrita Sinha in her study of the novel writes: “In *The Legends of Pensam*, Mamang Dai sketches a variegated socio-cultural landscape cohesively sustained by their vital folklore. The folklore of ‘Hoxo’ in these tales is that he is “the boy who fell from the sky” (Sinha 7). She emphasises that the meaning of this lore is to be understood in the context of the creation myths of the Adi tribe and should not be taken literally (Sinha 7). The mythical and mystical creation myths of the Adi tribe tells us about a sociality that is deeply located in an ecological consciousness which denies any connection to Indian Vedic mythology and the stories of Brahma being the creator. (Biju 217). Rakut and Hoxo grew up amidst these Adi orality, rituals and as fast friends they gathered memories wherever they went. Collective memory played an important part in the lives of these community members. However, they could not imagine the changes, which would govern their lives very soon when these memories would become their only strength to survive all that were to come. Even the death of Lutor “famous chief of the Ida clan, father of the boy who fell from the

sky” became inscribed into their memories, as it became a haunting tale of the spirit of the serpent Biribik that had returned to claim lives (Dai 11). The narrative by suggesting that similar human-nonhuman encounters abound in these hills re-emphasize the ecological consciousness of the Adi people and their well-preserved myths.

The narrator who belongs to the ancient village of Duyang and lives in a city positions herself in a way in which she gives us both the perspectives of the strange ways and lives of the village folk who are distanced from the modern ways of life and the invasions of various kinds which change their lives. She accompanies Mona who as the editor of a magazine called *Diary of the World*, was always on the lookout for unusual life stories to Gurdum town along with Mona’s husband, Jules. One story leads to another as they began their earnest search for more and more stories; in this manner they got to hear about the strange tale of Kalen and his encounter with death. These encounters only leave the villagers more resilient and spirited that is beyond the comprehension of people living outside those hills. For Kalen’s widow too life continues:

She had two small children and was barely in her mid-twenties. When we saw her, she was still wearing her hair tied back in her colourful bands like a gymnast. She fetched water, lit the evening fire, fed the pigs and chickens and carried on with her life without stopping to pine or utter recriminations (Dai 15).

The sad tale of Mona’s autistic child Adela just tends to remind us that whether it be a remote village or a city human pain and sufferings remain the same. Kalen’s fever which did not have any treatment, his death, Togum’s son Kepi who could not move, the strange serpent ritual that was conducted by Hoxo to treat little Kepi – all these are just few instances of beliefs, magic healing, strange sights, havoc of nature, curses and unpredictability that Dai refers to in her novel.

Relationships are far more complex than it appears to be in these remote lands. The sub section “Pinyar the widow” which narrates the tale of Pinyar a mother (of Kamur) who battles fate and the law for a son she has not seen since she lost him as an infant present her as an outspoken and fearless woman for whom “faith is everything” (Dai 35). Kamur’s mysterious tale of how he murders his baby girl and cuts down his younger son of which he remembers nothing immediately after would make readers shudder. However, in these timeless zones and among the people who lived in the in-between place, the past did not matter for long. The blame

was put by the village elders not on the Kamur but on “something in the blood” (Dai 31). Very soon, Kamur began to live a normal life with his wife and his elder son who survives the onslaught without a reference to the dubious past. Western legal traditions are defied by these societies which work in communion with Nature one of the fastest healers. Not just Kamur’s wife who forgives her husband and goes to live with him in a different village but also women like Pinyar harbours no ill feeling against the man who is responsible for her husband’s death resigning to their fate of widowhood completely and with faith.

The second section titled “Songs of the Rhapsodist” begins with the opening up of the hills to the world as colonial contact began. The tragedy involving the massacre of the troop of forty-seven sepoys lead by Noel Williamson and a tea garden doctor, Dr. Gregorson for reasons which remained a mystery thereafter with varying discourses generated by written accounts by the colonialists and oral narratives of the local people, each discourse blaming the other for the massacre. Sajal Nag in his extensive study on colonial state and the role of missionaries states:

Colonial societies around the world had experienced such debates over the need for modernization of traditional institutions and practices. Often the debates were not between the colonized and the colonialists but between agencies like the missionaries and the colonial administration, both of which sought to establish control over the destiny of the colonised people (Nag xv).

The colonizing mission in these remote hills also met with initial resistance but the people could not resist ‘colonial modernization’ which tended to interfere with the indigenous culture and religion practiced by the people. They were now introduced to modern education, literature, Western medicine, hygiene etc. However, Dai highlights the point that oral tales and myths of the hill people defies the narrative of progress which modernity lays claim to thereby redefining modernity in a moment of intense political and cultural crisis faced by the ethnic community of Pensam. Renato Rosaldo in his study on Ilongot headhunting demonstrated the oral historical imperative for an ethnography of small scale and marginalised cultures. Chris Healy too argues, oral or indigenous or ‘other’ histories should be understood in their own terms, and no attempt should be made to determine “what really happened” in a conventional historiographical manner (Healy 1997). Jules accompanied by Rakut reached the village of Komsing where a memorial stone to Williamson stood as a reminder of the incident which took place in 1912. They were greeted with a lot of

enthusiasm and a big fire “for the long night of stories, when myth and memory would be reborn in the song of the ponung dancers” (Dai 50). The dancers narrated “their history” by enacting various stories:

The dancers sigh and wipe their eyes. The fire burns brightly and the shaman is a shadow man leaping up larger than life. He has sung of the beginning of the world; of the sword of five metals that ignited the bonfire of the villages. He has sung the story of his brother, the one who killed a man and became a martyr; the story of the hawk woman who defied a community to live in a house by the river. These are the stories, rhapsodies of time and destiny, that he must guard. (Dai 55)

This section of the novel highlights the role of the shamans and rhapsodists in recording tales – of survival, of love, of betrayal, of gruesome murders, of honour, and also of shame. Myths and legends of Adis speak about the origin of gods and spirits, the origin of priests or shamans to mediate between the spirit world and the world of human. In an interview with Kolkata based bilingual writer and translator Jaydeep Sarangi, Dai mentions that “the oral tradition is a way of life that nurtured the Adi people through the centuries” (Sarangi 7). She briefly mentions the role of the shaman well versed in the different branches of evolutionary history, in transmitting epic narratives in ritual language collectively called Aabang or an act of storytelling for an audience. Stories abound in *The Legends Of-Pensam* and they are passed on from one generation to another.

The third section titled “daughters of the village” describes in details the difficult world of the women who have to toil hard “cutting wood, cracking dry bamboo and piling stray branches seasoned by sun and rain into stacks to be carried back to the village” exchanging a great deal on their lives and establishing hard facts like “a woman’s marriage beads and the obligations she fulfils as a wife and mother are the true measure of her worth” (Dai 80). In her study on sustainable livelihoods by women of Arunachal Pradesh, Sumi Krishna writes “indeed, the picturesque landscape, so appealing to tourists and researchers, masks a deeply gendered patriarchy where women have no rights, must always work, and should never be seen to be at leisure” (Krishna 125). The section also deals in the stories of women of the Adi community who guard the community’s ancestral roots with an unshakeable belief in the magic of their folk wisdom. The courage that Nenem displayed by falling in love with a “miglun” (“a foreigner” - a British officer named David Ferguson) was indeed exemplary. She was an unlettered village woman but one who possessed a spirit

that in a way defied tradition and customs. In making love Nenem, the river woman, was full of life, full of power, and full of desire to give and to receive and in no way did she display tendencies of a docile village woman who could be easily dismissed. One section titled “rites of love” describes Nenem in

Of all the stories, I had heard from Hoxo, I could sense that he brought the most affection and imagination to incidents that concerned Nenem. To him she was like the river, constant, nurturing, self-possessed. Like the river, she was the soul of our land. He had never seen Nenem, only imagined her through the free spirit, good sense and warm eyes of her daughter Losi, who became his wife (Dai 121).

She was one woman who had the courage to carry on a raging love affair, to let the man move on when he had to leave, to continue to live a free life on her own, to marry a man who admired her and to be a good and faithful wife to her husband Kao. Referred to as the river woman Nenem proves that the ethnic identity is a combination of human and non-human forms which carries the true essence of being a hill dweller. Like Nenem, the other brave woman whom Dai mentions is Losi, she is another woman whose manners and innocence needs to be woven into tales of how she grew up and how she met Hoxo, married him and mothered his children raising a fine family in the ancientness of Duyang. These women too occupy a middle space – of non-conformity on the one hand and a firm rootedness on the other celebrating not only the ethnic roots but also the problematic location of the Adis.

When tribal communities are accommodated into the ‘mainstream’ (comprising of larger dominant communities) the tribes, as Virginius Xaxa and Andre Beteille note, progressively get dispossessed of their control over land, forest, water, minerals and other resources in their own territory (Xaxa 1999). It is this fear of being absorbed which causes communities to choose not to lose what is their own; an urge to hold on to what is precious to them – their land, their customs, traditions, indigenous knowledge systems etc. (Beteille 1998). In the last section of the novel titled “a matter of time”, the roads are mentioned - the construction of the roads changed the status of the “mysterious and remote hills” which previously seemed “beyond time” (Dai 147). Everything became accessible after the roads came and along with it came mistrust and a sacrifice of age-old beliefs, rituals and customs. Robbery that was previously unheard of became a day-to-day affair and the simple rustic villagers wondered whether spirits

or men (especially migrant workers involved in the construction of the roads) were to be blamed (Dai 152).

Progress brought with it fear and sleepless nights for the mountain dwellers. The youth of the village resorted to violence in order to protect themselves from intrusion: "We are not seekers of fortune," they said. "We are not seekers of words. We are not seekers of a new identity leave us alone" (Dai 158). Amid the violence unleashed in the hills, the governments turned their backs to these villages after that. Elsewhere progress was taking place, the people were getting acquainted to the 'new' and 'modern' life where backbreaking toil was not a necessity to survive. Yet these villages carried the true essence of the community's soul preserved in the ritualistic practices and songs of the simple folk. As villages became small towns and towns approximate cities, the brave and patient few guard the old ways, negotiating change with memory and remembrance.

The narrator too participates in the activities of the village drawing in and becoming a part of the traditional and the indigenous rituals and customs which marks the beginning of the cultivation time. The cultivation season led to the creation of new songs and stories. They celebrate the magical moment of mingling yesterday with today and in this process, the most important thing is the power of words. The oral tradition was their strength, the essence of their lives. The stories of Sirsiri, the great singer who was "somewhere in-between" as she was neither old nor very young, belonging both to Gurdum and Duyang (Dai 184) and of Menga X, "the legendary performer of yesteryear" too highlight the wisdom of words. Change was an unstoppable process of the mind. For Rakut "change is a wonderful thing. It is a simple matter of rearrangement, a moment of great possibilities" (Dai 191). However, to be on both sides, to occupy the in-between space, between rigid rules on the one hand and flexible change on the other was the speciality of these people whom Mamang Dai immortalizes in her narrative. The narrator felt as if she occupied both the spaces and liked best the in-between space. She belonged to the land of elephants, high mountains and big rivers where people experienced strange dreams. She too believed firmly in what Rakut said that they were "peripheral" people. The Adi people welcomed change and they were not afraid of anything as long as they had words - stories, legends, myths and narratives. "We have words and the right words open our minds and hearts and help us to recognise one another" (Dai 191).

IV

For reasons of tradition and custom, in the absence of a writing system, among these tribes legal traditions were “inscribed” in oral expressions, rituals and other ritualistic practices in the ancient times. This very ‘orality’ preserves the ethnicity of these people who live in a land beyond the reach of the law. When Jacques Derrida discussed the “founding violence” of the law or an act of performative violence, he used as an example “the act of imposition of a language on ethnic minorities regrouped by the state” something that has occurred in different countries at different points of time (Derrida 21). By language here, we may also mean writing which is an entirely new mode of communication different from the oratory tradition. This was something Mona the magazine editor was trying to do. She even wanted a documentary filmmaker to make a film on Duyang and the other villages.

The act of scripting or documenting may be read as another form of violence in Derridean terms. The narrator however was unsure about what the result of documenting the lives of these villagers would be; would ‘documenting’ also mean ‘fixing’ the otherwise ‘fluid’ identity of these people? Hoxo, Rakut and others lived lives etched in the memories of the past. Mamang Dai not only recreates these numerous stories but also evokes the memories of the Adi people. Through these stories, they celebrate the middle space that they occupy and which accommodates the polarities of life. The last paragraph of the novel narrates the above-mentioned truth of the Adi way of life when the narrator looking through Nenem’s old binocular (which she had given to her daughter, Losi) gets to see a canopy of trees and “a river stretching like an ocean with a trembling sliver of light polishing its flat surface and apartment blocks and sail boats on the other.” (Dai 192)

At the same time would it mean that these people have been ‘integrated’ into the mainstream by means of such a documentation. RamchandraGuha in his work *Savaging the Civilized* discusses Verrier Elwin’s rejection of “the extremes of Isolation and Assimilation in favour of a middle way, the way of Integration” while discussing the absorption of the tribal communities of NEFA into the fabric of India which also involved “hinduization” (Guha 321). Integration was nothing but another mask through which the process of absorption would be complete without actually raising suspicion that the actual motive was not economic development of the undeveloped regions alone. At the same time the fact that the Inner Line Permit still exists for visitors to access these lands speak volumes regard-

ing the manner in which these lands and its inhabitants were perceived, though the theory that it is for tribal interests constructed by the British Government continues till today. However, the novel while addressing these political implications reiterates the tale of a community, which does not distance itself entirely from its cultural roots, survives, and flourishes primarily because it has not lost its soul, actually exposes the failure of absorption. Its soul comprises of its memories etched in its oral tales, that is stories and in these stories, one's identity lies intact untouched by the winds of change. Before her mysterious death, had given her only daughter Losi, a box of stories –

Keep this, this is the box of stories, you can shape them, colour them, and pull them out anytime. She handed down to her child Losi the small box with the pink jade lid that smelled sweet and comforting, and had held up the big copper-coloured binoculars for her to peer through. (Dai 116)

This ritual of passing down box of stories highlight the significance of oral traditions in the lives of the Adi tribe. (Sinha 6). The Adis are in an in-between state caught in between a decaying old order and the new winds of changes renouncing all three processes – isolation, assimilation and integration and emphasising on ethnic connectedness and continuity to reclaim and sustain their plural identities. Dai's novel in a way echoes Guha's estimate of Elwin's work which he claims had "a passionate desire to show ethnography what it might learn from literature, or the civilized world what it might learn from the tribes" (Guha 377). This process starts with the advent of the narrator and Mona who arrive with the intention of recording and carrying back stories from this region to the mainland – 'strange' stories of 'primitivity' etc. - but who later realise that they too are a part of Pensam and its anthropocentric epistemes.

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