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The Subaltern Speak- A Study On The Culture Of The Arunachalis With Special Reference To Mamang Dai's The Legends Of Pensam

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Abstract

North- East India is an under veiled region with an awe-inspiring landscape, different groups of ethnic people, their culture and heritage. Contemporary writers from this region aspire towards a vision outside the tapered ethnic channel, and they represent a shared history. In their writings, the cultural memory is showcased, and the intensity of feeling overflows the labour of technique and craft. Mamang Dai presents a rare glimpse into the ecology, culture, life of the tribal people and history of the land of the dawn-lit mountains, Arunachal Pradesh, through her novel *The Legends of Pensam*. The word 'Pensam' in the title means 'in-between', but it may also be interpreted as 'the hidden spaces of the heart'. This is a small world where anything can happen. Being adherents of the animistic faith, the tribes here believe in co-existence with the natural world along with the presence of spirits in their forests and rivers. This paper attempts to draw an insight into the culture and gender of the Arunachalis with special reference to *The Legends of Pensam* by Mamang Dai.

Key Words: Ecology, Animistic faith, pesant, Cultural memory, modernity, tapered ethnic channel.

North- East India is an under veiled region with an awe-inspiring landscape, different groups of ethnic people, their culture and heritage. This beautiful region with a troubled political climate and merging of various indigenous groups has risen to meet the world with a body of writing that is entirely different from the rest of India. This territory has many facets; it is not just a map; it is cultural and linguistic geography, diverse, vibrant and multicoloured (Dai 2006). In Northeast India, there integrate mist-filled ethnic and religious groups having different beliefs and customs. Arunachal Pradesh, with its majestic mountains, silent rivers flowing under the mist- filled slopes, profound legends, sacred spirits and grace make the landscape more exciting and intense. Contemporary writers from this region aspire towards a vision outside the tapered ethnic channel

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and represent a shared history. In their writings, the cultural memory is reprocessed, and the intensity of feeling overflows the labour of technique and craft. Mamang Dai presents a rare glimpse into the ecology, culture, life of the tribal people and history of the 'The Land of the Dawn Lit Mountains', Arunachal Pradesh through her novel *The Legends of Pensam*. This paper attempts to draw insight into the ecology and culture of the Arunachalis with particular reference to *The Legends of Pensam* by Mamang Dai.

Mamang Dai is firmly rooted with the soil of her native land; her works are a revelation of her bonding with the destiny of her place, her people. Whenever she ventures out, her heart always remains with the rivers, mountains, trees, jungles, rituals, legends, mythology, dances, villages and prayer flags of her dear abode, Arunachal Pradesh (Sanjoy 32). She was born in Pasighat, East Siang district; she is the Pride of Arunachal Pradesh, she has earned the glory for womenfolk of the tribal-state, the most influential feminist writers of the recent time whose language exhibit liveliness and imaginative suggestions. She is a very open and self-righteous woman who portrays human emotion, love, myth and culture in her works. She is the most intensely poetic voices from the North East. Her works have originality in their content and style. She is an internationally renowned poet, short story writer and novelist. She holds the privilege of being the first woman from the state to be selected to the Indian Administrative Service, but Mamang is such a person who sacrificed her highly lucrative service to take up pen, brush and canvas so that she could serve the society from the path others dared to venture. Mamang is the first from Arunachal to be conferred with Padma Shri Award for Literature and Education in 2011, which has added momentum for creating an encouraging literary atmosphere in the state. Her writing conveys an idea of a new literary tradition that has been born in Arunachali literature as well as in Indian English fiction.

Tradition and taboo are pillars to the Arunachalis they take pride in their taboo they fear God. They believe that if they forego their taboo, their belief would be shaken and their very existence questioned. A traditional rigid practice among ApaTani women was face tattooing and inserting nose plugs made of bamboo root. The tribes regard Hand tattooing as a mark of courage and beauty and they believe strongly in the myth that tattoos are a mark by which a person will recognise his kith and kin after life (Dai 43). Women of Arunachal take pride in tattooing and

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plugging their noses with bamboo roots they respect the ritual and take it to be a customary fashion. Among the tribes, a highly developed system of village councils functions as a guide to relations, moral standards, kinship and integration of group activities. The council were responsible for peace and harmony amongst members of the society and were empowered to settle all their disputes with the help of customary laws. The council includes elders functioning as a court of people in which women play a significant role. They are chosen for their knowledge, honesty and experience, and their powers of oration. It is like a sugar press, one elder explains and the others pay attention to what is said. Every word is refined, measured, weighed, carefully studied and then uttered. Every speaker is given a turn. Justice is the goal and advice comes from the power of words. Today, of course, modern law has led to changes in social and political systems of the tribes. The institution of Goan Burahs (village head) is still active and several women Goan Buris are appointed for their calibre and influence in society (Dai 51). Even today the women of Arunachal Pradesh administer the state, they have taken up many leading roles in the government affairs. They are civil servants, lawyers, ministers and what not. The women of Arunachal have enabled themselves, they hold high self-esteem, and they have never let the ancient belief of women being strong go false anywhere down the lane.

Mamang Dai's The Legends of Pensam (2006) is an intricate web of stories that explore the hidden facts of life and is a delightful mixture of myth, history, tribal beliefs and customs of the Adis, literally called "hill-people". The word 'Pensam' in the title means 'in-between' ,but it may also be interpreted as 'the hidden spaces of the heart'. The Adis is one of the 26 major tribes of Arunachal Pradesh, formerly known as NEFA, lying at the foothills of the Himalayas and sharing international borders with Bhutan, China and Myanmar. Being adherents of the animistic faith, the Adis believe in co-existence with the natural world and the spirit that is part of the forests, rivers and the vales (Dai 55). In the narration, pensam is middle-ground between myth and reality governing the lives of Adis, and also the transitionary phase between the traditional and modern ways of their life. Mamang also suggests that in the world of these beliefs, anything can happen and everything can be lived. As if to substantiate this, she starts the book with the story of a boy, Hoxo, 'who fell from the sky' and was carried by Lutor to his village.

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Lutor and his friend had been drafted to work on a massive road project by the 'migluns' (the British) across the Siang valley. When they return after 3 years, they bring along a basket containing the child. Lutor's friend tells the villagers, "There were great noise and fire in the sky, and our son fell to earth" (12). Accepted by the tribe unquestioningly, Hoxo goes on to lead an eventful life and play a vital role in the stories that unfold. In the last story, the aged Hoxo is shown spending time with an antique pair of binoculars with his granddaughter. The stories in between take the reader through a fascinating ride over a long period and tribal beliefs, from the legend of the origin of the tribe to modern times of development that throw their lives and customs into disarray. Their stories reflect a half-revealed and half-concealed world, sometimes to be felt by the subconscious rather than seen with ordinary eyes (Sanjoy 41). Violence too lurks behind the serene hills, true to Nature with its two facets. This is a small world where anything can happen. Being adherents of the animistic faith, the tribes here believe in co-existence with the natural world along with the presence of spirits in their forests and rivers.

The story intertwines a wide range of themes ranging from tribal practices, superstitious beliefs, human and the spirit world, tradition and modernity, memory and reality and the essence of orality. Through various stories, the author tries to give a voice to the 'peripheral people' who are not given space. Surviving in the heat and humidity of the Siang valley, the Adis accept things unquestioningly. They still practice an animistic faith that is woven around forest ecology and co-existence with the natural world. In the novel, Mamang says, "In our language, the word 'Pensam' means 'in-between' which suggests the middle-ground. It is the small world where anything can happen and everything can be lived" (1). Recitating the various legends that influence the lives of the hill people, this novel is a lyrical and moving tribute to the human spirit. It also reflects upon the lost history and the cultural dynamics of the Adis. The novel recounts the historical developments in the tribal areas with the advent of the Britishers. Rakut's father, Lutor, and many others worked under the Migluns. The elders were brainwashed and dominated by the Migluns into considering themselves inferior and were forced to stifle their energy and determination. The early decades of the twentieth century were times of great upheaval, where the killing of Noel Williamson in 1911 by an angry Adi suggested that there existed a communication gap between them. Many people were killed and since the Abor expedition of 1912, the whole of the Siang valley had been under the control of the British

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administration (14). Images of violence and brutal killing also finds place in the narrative. We see how an elderly man from the Migu clan slaughtered two women and how Kamur kills his own children as if he had been under a spell. In 'Daughters of the Village', Arsi says, "In my next life I shall be born a bird" (40). She longs to break free from the routine rustic life and to enjoy life to its fullest. The weather torments the people living here but they are contend with it. Merciless Rain God outrages his anger with fierce downpour stall days and sun ravage with unbearable heat in this region. Every peasant of the region is discouraged of the curse of this unpredictable weather. Dai's Arsi raises her voice to express her angst of being in a land of no destiny. The present grief what is glorified by the old. Naïve forefathers choose this land for the living and left nothing yet exiled from the land of living to a place of slippery slopes, muddy puddles, constant rain and mossy floors. The tribes here are lepers of their own land, crushed by the fear of continuous rain and danger of landslides and floods but accepted the living as it is the nature's cruelty to be tolerated (74). *The Legends of Pensam* not only recall the folklore but scorn the inhabitant's agony of invaders in the land. Inhabitants are partially thrilled of new light and the fearsome stories of death at the same time (38).

Dai magnificently describe the mighty blue mountains of Assam and the ever green richness of trees and shrubs, smoothness of bamboo filled banks, silver tone of rivers and twists with tales (34; 44; 52; 72). The love relationship between a tribal girl Nenem and British Captain David Ferguson takes us to a different plane altogether. It is an enigma how, despite all their differences, the two strangers were drawn to each other in the forlorn hills. When they parted, Nenem said to herself. 'No one dies of love. I loved him, and now I am enough of my own' (109). Nenem loved her land more than anything else, she simply couldn't part from her space and resume in another new world. This made her sacrifice her lover David. Years later, she resigns to her fate and gets married to Kao. The village headman sees that all the rites are carried on according to their custom he keeps awake day and night and takes care that no rite is missed as it was considered a misfortune. Things change, but Nenem was like the river, constant, nurturing, self-possessed (121). She had dreamt of raising up her family and living amidst her own people. She gave birth to Losi and from then she became closer to Kao, she lead the life she dreamt of. But few years later, after the disastrous earthquake had claimed numerous lives and property in the village, Nenem goes to bathe in the river she feels dizzy and sits looks at the

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glittering trees and then passes away (127). The funeral rites happen according to their custom and all the villagers mourn the death of Nenem and cry for Kao. In the later part of the narrative, conflict goes on between tradition and modernity. With modernity, came issues of burglaries and murder. Their houses were not safe anymore. Electric poles and land were stolen. Forests were being cut and logs floated away down the river. New fences marked old territories and it seemed a curtain had fallen over the old villagers. What was once sacred, the old sense of joy was being lost. Towards the end, Raket says, 'We are peripheral people. Everywhere, people like us, we turned with the world. Our lives turned, and in the circle who could tell where was the beginning and where the end? We are just peripheral people, thinking out our thoughts!' (144). Thus, Mamang Dai, in her novel historicizes the cultural context of the people and attempts to give them a voice which would transcend across boundaries.

The writers from Arunachal Pradesh have crossed the linguistic barriers decisively in order to create a literature of their own. The writers from many of the smaller ethnic communities of North-Eastern India whose native languages do not have a script of their own or are spoken by only a handful of people have, however, adopted English as their acquired language. Contemporary North-East writing has a purpose which is committed to social change. It strives on a free representation of culture and the self.

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