

Review Article

With the Margin: The Theme of Gendered Subaltern in Mamang Dai's *Legends of Pensam*

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Abstract: Whether it is the pre-colonial, colonial, or post-colonial era, the problems of the indigenous tribal women of North-East India have not changed much. The same scenario is reflected in Mamang Dai's *Legends of Pensam* as the women on margin have always retained in the same shape and misery. The gendered subalterns have been suffering in silence accepting their fate or restricting themselves amid their limited demarcated territory in order to survive. Over the years, these fair sexes are not only being ignored and exploited, under the hands of the colonial or elitist masses but also by the patriarchal structure designed in the Indian society. Various types of changes and uncertainties have touched the premises in the land of the Adi tribes, placing the women somewhere inbetween tradition and modernity. Dai in her work has tried to portray the scuffling situations of the Adi women, how they have resisted and quietly tackled those changes, uniquely sculpting their own identity. Keeping those silences and muted existences of the indigenous women in mind, this paper is an earnest attempt to hear the voices of those women or give them a chance to bring their survival complexities in the eyes of mainland India and the world.

Keywords: Adi tribes, margin, subaltern, voice.

INTRODUCTION

"I was born in the mountains, in a village where boys kicked rocks around pretending a football" (Dai 2006, 3). Author Mamang Dai is an acknowledged writer from the hills of Arunachal Pradesh whose works are intensely saturated in the tribal folklore and culture. She has the prestige of being conferred the Padmashree award in 2011 and the Verrier Elwin award in 2003. (Khangte 190). Dai is firmly attached and rooted with the soil of her own native land; her works are a revelation of her bonding with the destiny of her own place and her people. Born in Pasighat, near East Siang River of Itanagar, Arunachal Pradesh, Dai was the first woman from the state to have cracked the IAS exam, but she left her profession of being a bureaucrat and opted for writing as her career in order to make her tribe; the Adis seek attention to a worldwide readers. (Cheryl 2)

In the 'author's note' of Dai's 'The Legends of Pensam', she introduces her clan, who are deeply submerged with the ecospiritualism of their own land like majority of the tribes inhabiting the central belt of Arunachal, the Adis practice an animistic faith that is woven around forest ecology and co-existence with the natural world. The Adis mostly inhabit the Upper Siang, East Siang and Lower Dibang Valley districts of Arunachal Pradesh. The oldest village is the Damro from where they scattered and settled in different places all over the state. According to Pertin's research, Tibet is

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the original home, of the Adi Paadams, but still various research are going on to authenticate the original place of migration of the Adis. (Pertin 14, 27)

The North-east India is a cartographic construct which existed as a frontier area in the official discourse of the British administration and later in Indian administration. The region which is a house of various tribes mostly from Mongoloid origin, with the nationalization of space was strategically peopled at regular intervals since 1826, thereby saturating the tribal population with the non-tribals. This created resentment among the indigenous population who felt that not only the outsiders overwhelm their numbers but also the valuable resources are extracted by the government of India. Consequently, a sense of protest and resistance gave rise to the feeling of sub-nationalism in the entire northeast India over a period of time. This sub-nationalism emerged by drawing its impetus from the local culture, myth and sense of an alternate history of the people and eventually it became similar to 'extremist style of politics' as pointed by Partha Chatterjee while explaining the problems of Nationalism in Asian context. (Biswas et al. 73) The North East India is always judged with its preconceived notions of political unrest, ethnic strife and violent insurgency. The eight daughter states of North-east is connected with the rest part of the India by the Siliguri Corridor or the Chicken's Neck, which is a thin strip of land touching China in the North, Myanmar in the East and Bangladesh in the South. (Chambling 148) Patricia Mukhim writes,

...a landmass which is seven per cent of the country's total area. The region shares only two per cent of its boundary with India while the remaining 98 per cent is bordered by the other countries...In terms of their physical features, ethnicity, culture, food habits, and language, there is closer affinity with people of South Asia than the people of North-East India" (Datray 36)

The gradually changing relations between Northeast India and the rest of the country have been described in terms of the 'mainland' and the 'periphery'. The narrow Siliguri corridor takes on a symbolic significance, one that stands for a sense of alienation from or by the rest of India among/towards the people of Northeast Frontier thus bifurcating the divide between the mainland and the 'Other'. (Goswami 2)

North-east is a distinct region with its wide variety of cultural, religious and linguistic diversities. Arunachal Pradesh is the largest among the North Eastern states and the greenest. It is wild and mountainous province and among the tribes there is no inequity among the boys and girls. But boys are preferred over girls for inheriting ancestral property and for carrying forward the generations. Male plays an active role for serving as the head of the family and driving an authoritative rule. Polygamy is practiced. Women's role is demarcated within the domicile boundary of brewing coffee and liquor and working in the agricultural fields. Women are majorly barred from decision making roles or participating in the village councils until and unless they themselves are part of an integral case. Girls are married off at a tender age and their education is given very less priority among the tribes. (Khosla 149)

In a Development Seminar, hosted by 'Brookings India', *Padmashree* awardee Patricia Mukhim presented certain key insights from her book, *Waiting for an Equal World: Gender in the North East*, where she discussed several myths about the overly romanticized concept of matrilineal society of Meghalaya. She pointed out that women in a matrilineal society are not necessarily better off and nor are they naturally empowered. She highlighted the plight of the young pregnant-drop-out-girls who by default have to support and run their families single handedly. She also spoke about the fact how certain women in North East, in order to survive, helplessly depend on prostitution as an opted profession just as the culture is there in Thailand. The blog of 'Brookings India' also summarized how women in Meghalaya are landowners but in the marriage market only non-inheriting daughters are preferred by men.

Simone De Beauvoir in her 1949 treatise 'The Second Sex', argues that men are able to mystify women. This mystification and stereotyping designed into a shape of creating patriarchal realm. Men and Women are therefore, constantly engaged in this Subject-Other relation where Man is the subject or the self and woman is the other or inferior.

The particular repression of the "Other" is what is explored in majority of women's writing. As women are denied of their semantic space, the very act of writing creates the possibility for a critique of language as well as patriarchal discourse. It is through language women can locate their position and identity. (Gahatraj 2) The term 'subaltern' was first introduced by Italian Marxist critic Antonio Gramsci. His main aim of categorizing subalternity was to identify and analyze subordinated social groups whose political activity was either ignored, misinterpreted or on the margins of dominant history. Though Gramsci's writings have generated new ways of rethinking nationalist history and post coloniality, many scholars have interpreted the meaning of 'subaltern' in the *Prison Notebooks* solely in terms of class, asserting the word is code for proletariat, born out of prison censorship. (Green 116)

Guha pointed out that British colonialism has left an "uneven" impact on economic and social developments in India, therefore it was necessary to understand how different sections of society were affected from 'area to area'. Within Indian historiography the emphasis of understanding politics on the basis of class structures had obscured the fact that

one group which was dominant in one region or locality of India was actually dominated in another. Guha claimed that by moving away from an analysis of politics from an all Indian level focusing on class dynamics, it was important for the historian to understand the heterogeneity and ambiguity in within society. (Chaturvedi 10) Partha Chatterjee in his book *Nation and its Fragments: Colonial and Post colonial Histories* identified the possibilities and limitations of nationalism as a hegemonic movement, where there is a need to look into the specific process of ideological construction and disentangle the web in which the experiences of simultaneous subordination and domination are apparently reconciled. (Chatterjee 94) Gayatri Chakraborty Spivak argues that since the subaltern is always 'represented' by and in the elite, dominant discourses, the actual 'voice' of the subaltern is never 'heard', not even in the postcolonial critical enquiry initiated by the subaltern historians. In her essay 'Can the Subaltern Speak?' Spivak draws upon the nineteenth century colonial law and the ancient Hindu scriptural texts on widow was always appropriated by these hegemonic discourses: Between patriarchy and imperialism...the figure of woman disappears, not into the pristine nothingness, but into a violent shuttling which is the displaced figuration of the 'third world woman' caught between tradition and modernization. (Chakraborty 5)

Spivak debates in her essay whether Western feminism's tendency to speak on behalf of "Third World" woman actually silences their voices in their representation. Spivak expands the original definition of the term subaltern and sub-proletariat, developed by Ranajit Guha and others to include the struggles and experiences of the women where she encouraged as well as criticized the direction taken by Subaltern Studies in India. For her it addresses deeper issues like dependence upon Western intellectuals for the subaltern condition than allowing them to speak for themselves. Pramod K. Nayar in his book 'Literary Theory Today' includes a view where Harish Trivedi addresses a similar issue in his response to Spivak, he says, that the subaltern has always spoken in a native tongue. The issue is not whether the subaltern can speak rather it is whether the subaltern can speak in the language of the metropolitan center. (Gahatraj 3-4) Kamala Visweswaran in her article, 'Small Speeches, subaltern gender: Nationalist ideology and its historiography', expands the definition of subaltern as any person whether man or woman who fails to get justice in a patriarchal structure falls under the category of marginalization.

Mamang Dai at the starting of her book, *The Legends of Pensam*, throws light on the meaning of the word 'pensam', "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 a 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. And the word 'pensam' which means in-between reminds us of the French folklorist and anthropologist Anton Van Gennep who pioneered the book *Le rites de passage* (1909), where he structured the tripartite model of transitions in a person's life from their birth to death- rites of separation, in-between phase and the rites of incorporation. Later anthropologist Victor Turner added a new dimension to this concept of in-between which he termed as the liminal phase. The word liminal is derived from the Latin word 'limen' which means threshold or boundary. Basically, Turner wants to say that in a socio-cultural occasion, while passing from one stage to another, one has to pass a transitional passage and that passage needs a threshold. In that threshold, a person engages himself/herself in various rituals or creative spaces, as per their own choice, and that is the phase of passing from liminality to liminoid.

Thus in the case of the women of the Adi tribes of Arunachal Pradesh, it can be said that if subaltern is a political position where they are treated as the margin or represented as the peripheral people away from the center, then in order to survive, the Adi women have adopted the ritualization process or the characters are going through various in-between phases in their lifestyle. Thus, liminality can be used for unpacking the dominance and crafting a unique identity of their culture. The women are experiencing every change in silence, but they are responding and reacting against those in their signature style. Bjorn Thomassen in the 'Introduction' his book *Liminality and the modern: Living through the in-between*, describes that liminality is on one hand a typical uncertain or unsettling situation and on the other hand it is like experiencing an unlimited freedom. It depends on the transition of human beings acceptance and their react to changes that they undergo in their life. *The Legends of Pensam* is divided into 4 sections- 'a diary of the world', 'songs of the rhapsodist', 'daughters of the village' and 'a matter of time'. Throughout the four sections, there is a mention of the three different time periods-the pre-colonial period, the colonial period and the postcolonial period. Dai's women characters are seen facing dominance under three main instruments- the absence presence of the good and the evil spirits, the torture and cruelty of the British migluns and the patriarchal society. In the beginning of the novel, it is observed that the narrator and five other people are travelling from Assam to the Gurdum town, from where they are going to visit at the narrator's native place, which is the village of the widows or as the narrator puts it, "my late mother's ancestral village". (12) The narrator embraces a conflict of emotions in her transitional state of mind as she is travelling from the present to the past.

In the chapter, 'the strange case of Kalen, the hunter', we meet a young widow Omum, who loses her husband in an unfortunate hunting incident. After her husband's death, she lived with her in-laws and kept herself busy with household chores and agricultural activities, "She had two children and was barely in her mid-twenties. When we saw

her, she was still wearing her hair tied back in 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.” (15) In the next chapter, ‘the silence of Adela and Kepi’, we get to know the despairing tale of narrator’s friend Mona, who is of Arab-Greek extraction and got married to a French man Jules. They run their domicile as per Western standards, following a very ‘mobile lifestyle’, because Jules is a development scientist and Mona is a proprietor of a glossy magazine ‘Diary of the World’. But, the disconsolate phase appears in Mona’s life when her daughter Adela was configured with an autoimmune disease and she was blamed for being an irresponsible mother, who instead of looking after her daughter was occupied with the chores of the public domain. A mother’s role in the patriarchal society is always cornered to care and sacrifice.

Again, we have another widow character Pinyar, who was first married to a man named Orka and with him she had a son Kamur. Both the father and the son abandoned her. The she was forcefully married to another man Lekon, who died by hunting so Pinyar was left a widow. In order to survive Pinyar engages herself working in the fields and getting herself busy with the tribal faiths and ritual. Not only that that when her home accidentally catches fire, she was banished to stay far away from the village. But Pinyar never protests against anything instead she accepts her fate saying, “It seems my destiny is cursed”. (28) Pinyar also narrates how a house among the Adis is considered lucky if a woman can make rice beer and the *Si-ye* cakes. The Adi women plugged their noses with bamboo pins and they took pride in tattooing as a mark of courage and beauty. They believed after their death, it is by the tattoo that their next generation can identify the kith and kin. (Cheryl 15)

In the ‘words of women’, we meet a dejected character Arsi who blames her forefathers, for choosing such a land to live, as according to her the land has got no destiny and no future, “Is this a place to live? She had asked, ‘Why did our forefathers choose this place? Surely we are outcasts dumped in this bone and knuckle part of the world!’” (74) Arsi cries the unstable and horrible situation of the women of the Adi tribes who are left to work in the kitchen and agricultural fields carrying huge loads and suffering under the hands of the male members of the family. Women’s problems go unnoticed and ignored by the men. Thus women are trying to liberate themselves, but yet they know, their voices will echo only in limited ears:

Arsi said, “In my next life I shall be born a bird.”

“And do what?” Mimum laughed.

“Oh so many things. Sing, fly. Live properly, for instance. Speak English.”

Now old Me-me, who had been quite all this while, said, “Hah! Listen to this bird! You should be careful. If a woman becomes too clever no one will marry her”. (75-76)

Although the women faced such uncertainty in their life facing only pathos, loneliness and alienation from men, but still they are seen praying for the well-being of the male members of the family, “Let no harm come to our men”. (77)

In the chapter, ‘river woman’, we meet Nenem the river woman who is shown as a very strong character initially falling in love with a Britisher named David, but when time comes for her to leave her land in order to marry off with the man, she resists doing that and denies to betray her land. Nenem puts her sorrowful words, “No one dies of love. I loved him, and now I am enough on my own”. (109) After that, Nenem was married to Kao, whom she was unable to accept, but she kept her love blossomed for David and tried to move on in her new life with Kao, by planting orange trees. Nenem was very attached to her own land, nature and the river. When an earthquake came to her village and they had to shift from one place to another. Nenem could bear the shock and died. The villagers badly mourned the death of Nenem and said, “No other beauty will match yours in this world or in the next”. Nenem’s beauty has been compared with beauty of the Nature. She is given an equal status of the Mother Nature in the novel.

Ecofeminism centers upon the conception of nature as feminine, the domination of that feminine force by science and the way in which that contributes to the subjugation of women. Ecofeminism sees women culture as more aligned to natural world. Ecofeminists strive to dismantle the rigid patriarchal demarcations between body and intellect and civilization and nature from a theoretical perspective. And right from the outset ecofeminism has been remarkably sensitive to links between local and global. These kind of women narratives from Northeast have invariable ecofeminist inclination in their literary and sociological expressions that reveal of a close tie with nature in their indomitable tryst against patriarchal forces. (Ahmed 217) We meet another helpless woman Issam, ‘on the road’, who could sense her village being occupied by looters and plunders, who are trying to break the peace of the land, but she could not stand to fight against the issue being a woman, “At such times she wished she were a man. Then she would show him that what it was to be a real man.”

In the chapter ‘a portrait of Sirsiri of gurdum’, we encounter the frustrated character Sirsiri, who is forced to marry a man Pessa, who was a government employee. But Sirsiri was a different kind of woman who could sing very

well and could play cards as hard as men. She was quite ambitious and wanted a different life away from the hills in a metropolitan materialistic life. When she was denied the modernistic living, she was always complaining and yelling, "Oh! What a place, cursed ill-chosen and disturbed!" (168) When nothing offered Sirsiri spiritual peace, it was just her music that left her to achieve some mental solace. Losi, is a character in the novel who is the daughter of the river woman and got married to a man Hoxo who fell from the sky. Before her death, Nenem handed Losi, box of stories and asked her to keep it carefully with her and to hand it properly to the next generation. The box contained a pair of binoculars. According to writer Samrita Sinha, the handing over of the box of stories symbolizes how women are considered the culture bearers and the main asset of holding cultures of any community.

CONCLUSION

Women in the Adi tribes and the entire Northeast are very talented and artistic. We see Mirabai Chanu bagging the silver medal in Tokyo Olympics 2021 and again getting herself qualified for weight lifting in commonwealth games. Then, there is Tage Rita, a woman entrepreneur from Arunachal Pradesh being conferred with the 'Nari Shakti Purashkar' by President Kovind for making the first organic kiwi wine in India. All the trade fares hosted in the big cities of India are often visible taking pride by showcasing the creative bamboo and handloom products done by the women from Northeast. So, if the present day India comes out of the vague concept of the center and the margin, oppressor and oppressed, dominator and dominated, insider and outsider politics and start providing access to resources to all the corners of Northeast women by making an unified and indiscriminatory land, following the one-nation theory then the women from Northeast can excel at a far better level and can even contribute for the betterment of the nation.

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