

Merging Identity with Nature : Reading Mamang Dai's *The Legends of Pensam* from an Ecofeminist Perspective

Lalsanlevis Nampui

Abstract:

Considering the corpus of literature from different writers of North East India, especially of writings in English, the theme of identity has been found greatly addressed or indirectly celebrated in these works. Writing itself can be seen as an act of survival for many of the blooming writers with their roots and origin steeped into the mystifying lands of the North East. Hence, the land and its people make a dominant appearance with nature forming as one of the shades of entity for the many hill dwellers or significantly, hill communities of this region. Such is essentially the case of Mamang Dai, a noted literary figure of Arunachal Pradesh (of India) constantly speaking for the soul of the enchanting lands of Arunachal. This paper is mainly directed towards an analytical reading of one of her successful works, *The Legends of Pensam* (2006) to underline the spirituality of Ecofeminism reverberated through many of the stories recounted in the legends. It is important to associate again how nature, women and identity assimilate with each other, presenting stories of the past which however cannot be delinked with the present. The joys of the bygone days in oneness with nature and beings, the threats to identity-of the self (of inclusion and seclusion from nature) and the community (at the extended level for distancing with nature) and the waiting for a hopeful day act as reminders for human life restrained with power struggle, changing notions of identity and diminution of individuality. The power play engaging identities both high and low in the day to day life is deeply resonant as Mamang Dai unravels beautiful, at times strange, mysterious and innocent stories of living characters in the legends.

Keywords : *identity, literature, nature, ecofeminism.*

The term, 'identity' attains a very emphatic note when it brings into focus the vibrant milieu of North East India. It is strongly vital and can be easily related to struggle, assertion (its recognition and acceptance narrowed down greatly here generally) and large scale manifestations. Many a times, it can be problematic when simply interchanged with ethnicity where marginalization and marginalizing tend to overlap each other. Whatever history or histories could be connected with the people of this region, commonly called 'North-East Region' or 'Northeast India', the perception of tribal identity in particular has now gone through some modifications for the better in place of fixity and stereotyping. Though commonly adjoined with remoteness, which in turn is interpreted for backwardness and violence chiefly highlighted as everyday survival struggle; the present picture of North East India as painted by the contemporary writers in English is beyond these views. Political and economic developments again might not be so visible but literature has then contributed much to the expression of life and people living among the hills. It is undeniable that literature remarkably has a high potential to capture reality partially, extensively or even wholly. And so, with the kind of representation through the current writers coming from North-Eastern India, there are not only the facets of reality but the notion of identity tends to acquire a fresh treatment; capable to draw lines of assimilation and universalising along the mainstream. This paper is an attempt to underline the perspectives of identity conjoined with nature and also to highlight the ecocritical perspectives and more of ecofeminism through an analytic study of *The Legends of Pensam*, first published in the year, 2016 and written by Mamang Dai, another noted contemporary writer hailing from Arunachal Pradesh of North East India.

Literature for Crafting Identity :

Literature embodies printed information along with artistic merit. The intrinsic worth and power of power is this body is immense and immeasurable. In creating space for the common lives of the hill folks in the world of literature, North East writers invariably are attempting identity construction at all levels- individual, collective, regional or national. They tell stories not only about terror and violence but blended discourse on democracy, freedom, nationhood, territorial affiliation and peace. Their narrative or discourse also matters since literature always makes room for inclusion, it is meant for all and unaffected by territorial margins and cultural diversifications. It never disappoints when dealing with the human condition, often evoking thought and feeling. Literature has the enabling power to assimilate all under the same umbrella, with the condition of being (whether human or non-human). It speaks about humanity and also of the loss of humanity. The context is all that vary and writers from this part of the country cannot be simply viewed as representing their social and literary tradition alone. In fact, these writers find their voice and create perspective through

arrays of culture, history, daily experience, race, gender and folklore. It would indeed be a difficult task to state down the primary characteristics of literary conventions coming from this particular region. In North East India, we come across several languages, religion not only one- Hinduism, Buddhism, Animism, Islam, Sikhism and Christianity existing along each other. Thus, when we are confronted with the word, identity; it is imperative to understand what the substantial mark of identity is. As we admit heterogeneity as a remarkable aspect of the social and political life of the people, can identity be merely based on race, language, region or religion? Here, in the literary world we find celebration of nature, heritage, landscape and also the conscious attempts to emphasize the possibilities of change, to move outside territorial identification, search for relationships and commonalities.

Shaping Identity and Nature into One :

North East Frontier Agency (NEFA) as the old name of Arunachal Pradesh truly subscribes to its name as very much a frontier land. The dwelling place of the sun-god, Aruna; geographically the state shares its boundaries with the neighbouring countries of Bhutan, Tibet and Burma. However, historically the land had been almost a virgin land largely undisturbed by outsiders, neighbours and colonial exploiters. It is perhaps for this reason that myths and folk traditions continue to exist and regulate the simple lives dwelling among the hilly tracts. Mamang Dai, a journalist and former civil servant in *The Legends of Pensam* (2006) presents a host of ancient legends of the Adis in particular retold by some people out of memory. It can be mentioned that memory in fact becomes a potent device for the artless narration of stories that follows which becomes mystifying, captivating and surprising all at once. In a very impressive and convincing manner, she takes the reader on to a journey that is much scintillating such that it seems like a leap into the distant past and the world seen with awe, admiration and wonder. The life of the Adis depicted here shows them with animistic faith yet endearing and fulfilling in the embrace of nature. The tiny but old villages lie surrounded by dense forest or placed on high mountain passes. In the words of the author herself, "Isolation has been the best protection for the pristine forests and rich bio-diversity of Arunachal." (Dai xii). Story telling fills the most part of this book except for the songs of the rhapsodist chanting his songs amidst the hidden mountains. In an attempt to connect the fine threads of stories retold, two important things become visibly clear-forest ecology and co-existence with the natural world.

The world of Pensam though remote is greatly unaffected by humdrums of the so-called modern but restless life forms. Here, the villages heave with life as if welling up with revelations and mystery. A web of magic seems to glitter, encircling over the lives of the innocent folks where all things seemed possible and true. There is a resurfacing of ancient

culture, traditional myths and practices take place with nature as a primeval force upon the lives of people. To this can be added the vital issue of how ecology itself has been used as a metaphor for culture. The people, their food habits, dress, dance, music, folk festivals etc. cannot be viewed as existing apart from the natural environment. Likewise, it would not be so difficult to identify the ecocritical perspectives permeated through the numerous stories related by the characters.

‘They had surrendered ancestral lands to the government and now the road and the things that came with it seemed...to steal their identity like a thief’, (Dai 156-157)

And then, “The tree made an indescribable sound as it fell, and Larik thought, ‘The old tree is weeping’.”(Dai 159)

Like Larik from the story of ‘the road’, the readers are drawn to the environmental woes perpetrated under disguised urbanisation or development. This infringement upon nature/environment largely developed in the mid nineteenth century with industrialization comes into view. This apparently creates focus on the resulting split between culture and civilization. The release of scientific approach with a propensity for both boon and curse can be counted as one of the primary causes for ecological imbalance or environmental crisis. The awareness of the threat to the natural environment has been ventilated at several occasions in the book. Changes in the picture of yesterday and today are sharply noticed by characters like Rakut’s father and Hoxo’s father who could testify of Stilwell Road demanding a high toll of human lives, of a no man’s land where the only people living there (past the Lake of No Return) are the men with guns. (Dai 41). In one of her poems, “The Voice of the Mountain”, this same view recurs when Dai writes-

We live in territories forever ancient and new,
And as we speak in changing languages
I, also, leave my spear leaning by the tree. [12-14]

The voice of the mountain is also the voice of the narrator; the voices unite to claim that the world is forever changing but peace and permanence are still out of hand. The yesteryears are more endearing with the immortal sun, mountains and rocks like the past recreating itself through thousands of years. The young turns old and is gone, however, the waning nature can still outline the chapters of the world. A growing concern about the defects of mindless developments affecting nature extensively can be easily reached to as the inhabitants of Pensam indirectly draw a comparison between the early years and the present. Through the mode of memory or recollection, the sharp contrast is drawn. At every point there is an underlying acknowledgement of identity with nature and a growing sense of gradual alienation from nature in many of the stories. Besides ecocritical perspectives making

its way, often there is a case of moral dilemma in case of identity. In other words, for this hill community which had found abode only in nature; how much are they to identify with the past (whose identity is merged with nature) and how far are they to go ahead?

It is interesting to note that their identity is rooted in nature itself. As we look at characters or story tellers like Hoxo, Pinyar and Nenem, they have been known and identified themselves with the elements of nature alone. Hoxo was believed that he belonged to the sky, people called him as the boy who fell from the sky. Pinyar again, though a widow was gifted in her young age to make the best ‘si-ye cakes’ among women by a small race of supernatural beings called the ‘miti-mili’. The legendary beauty, Nenem has been called ‘river woman’ and every villager who knew her would remark that she was like the river. These kinds of characters have to spend their whole lives among the forests, rivers and hills but if at all, they were to be removed from their ordinary environment, they become most perceptible to identity crisis. Here again is a clear depiction of how identity has been merged with the objects of nature, how the living conditions of these folks are very much shaped and dependent on the providence of nature. In this context, the process of culture and civilization are undoubtedly affiliated to nature in several ways. Nature is not simply an object of worship for them but the basis of identity and existence is interdependent on nature.

Drawing Lines of Ecofeminism :

Environmental issues in the west and the east have different pictures to offer. Of the west, it is mainly of the massive exploitation of natural environment in its heady race of capitalism. Meanwhile, in the east, specially referring to the third world countries, environmentalism is directed towards uncontrolled poverty and economic crisis as the major reasons behind ecological degradation. In the third world nations, there is often a dearth of land for the poor and hence conservation of forests or protection of wilderness is not all significant for that section or group of society who are thriving under acute poverty. However, the western notions of nature have been retained largely in the east. For example, the concept of nature versus culture is one where women are equated with nature and with culture. Here again, the image of nature is essentially figured as a feminine gender and hence reference to the nature as ‘mother nature’. Thus emerges ecofeminism from the mainstream of ecocriticism towards the end of the twentieth century. Under ecocriticism, older myths and religious beliefs find profound significance for nature is revered. Either human or non-human, all lives remain embedded in nature. Ecofeminists not only legitimise female power but also give importance to women’s knowledge. They argue that the pre-modern cultures were more suitable for ecology as nature was then held with far greater respect. Keeping in view the ecofeminist spirituality, it comes to sharp notice that *The Legends of Pensam* offers penetrating

thoughts on the identity of women and nature as lying in the same train of thought. At certain point, this book clearly explains how both women and nature are equally exploited by the male ways of thinking and action. At another point, it shows how the female characters share much of their identity with nature, thereby establishing the fact that a woman's relationship with the environment is far stronger than man's. Identity of women resurfaces when taken into consideration their nature, work, knowledge and situatedness.

Right from the beginning, the legends of Pensam seep in ancient and folksy tales with the characters taking part in the narration. Unreasonable the stories might seem to some but reversing the androcentric priority of reason over emotion is what radical ecofeminism would easily allow, here is the tacit overthrow of reason at large. This then enables the intricate weaving of tales through oral tradition and recollection. The world of these folk tales brings the memorable and sweet picture of nature in the past right before the eyes. Nature was then likable to the pristine form, its bond with humans far reliable and better experienced. There are also parallels drawn of the women characters with the objects of nature.

'Hah! Listen to this bird! You should be careful.' (Dai 76)

Here, old Me-me chides young Ari when she expressed her desire to be reborn as a bird to be able to fly. She then finds herself instructed that it is only through marriage and achieving motherhood, she would be able to realise her true worth in life. Arsi is called a bird and not innocent for her childish longings, just like it is very common to refer a young dame to a bird. As a woman, as she is to yield to marriage in order to attain her worth, nature too is eminently expected to yield for the human needs. The story ends with a prayer to the earth, 'Grant us blessings. Give us food. Oh! Great mother! Protect us!' (Dai 79)

The legendary beauty, Nenem who has been called river woman was once admitted to the first mission school in a town across the river. Her illness rescued her from the school which she actually hated, she later tells her friends that while her time at school she was most frightened with the thought of not being able to see the river again. Later as she grew up into a beautiful lady, she easily found the attraction of a young British official, David whom she could not herself resist from. Their relation did not end well as David left the village while Nenem was unwilling to follow him. Their love story somehow had a connection with ripe oranges, which served as the chief occasion for David to approach Nenem and for Nenem to cherish her old memories by planting orange grove in her garden even after marrying Kao. No one ever understood why she planted orange trees. And in the end, she breathed her last just beyond the orange trees as she went to fetch water. Kao bore the pain silently to watch his wife and was later buried in the grove of the orange trees. Here, Kao could also see the changes that were taking in his land. He saw 'the plainsmen and their co-conspirators from

the hills who came to bring down the old trees and flatten the hills' (Dai 130). He noted with his meticulous eye how the hidden life forms in the ancient body of the earth were being uprooted. The land was changing and so also the lives of the people. Yet Nenem's pain of loving the one she truly loved remained with her till the end. Had David stayed back for the sake of their relation, Nenem would not feel her dying even after blessed with a loving husband and child. The manner in which Nenem lay struck with heart pain in love that never found any cure and how the environment in which she lived remained continually inflicted create a striking note of similarity here. As a woman, Nenem sacrificed her love for the land and her land lay unprotected and desecrated in the hands of constructors and road builders.

For characters like Rakut, 'change is a wonderful thing. It is a simple matter of rearrangement, a moment of great possibilities... Hoxo pointed out the green engot plant growing wild near the house from which a green dye could be extracted (Dai 190-191). He thinks that everything was available for nature to provide. They were however, unable to fully realise that 'the texture and the speed of change' was already making visible impressions all across the land. In Pico, during the sowing season and its celebration, a visitor would still see the green hills, green bamboo and the green rivers flowing in all directions. Besides this, it was now very common to see young men on motorcycles roaring across the stones while young picnickers wearing fake fur and woollen caps waved at passers-by. Again, Motum village team for volleyball was disqualified because one of their players tried to play holding a bottle of beer in one hand. In the end, the narrator holding up the old binoculars peers into the glass. The old lens began to clearly show the distant canopy of trees and a river stretching like an ocean. In the distance was also the sight of narrow apartment blocks, grubby streets and bamboo scaffolding.

Conclusion :

The change or transformation taking place in the lives of many of the characters in the stories is often marked as sudden and drastic. The increasing number of widows for hunting accidents did not find any solution for the poor widows. Here, we consider sufferings in the case of not only the women section but also of the dangers to the wildlife system from hunters. Life seemed unchanging to the suffering but the environment became not only polluted but also subjected to several forms of exploitation. Identification of women with nature has remained the same but there is also a rising awareness of the degrading environment in the long run, *The Legends of Pensam* strikes on the same note besides impressing the readers with the art of narration. What is more identical here are the level of persecution and the extent of misery borne on to these two entities in the name of the so-called, laws of nature or destiny. It would not be overtly abrasive to suggest that the environment needs a quick

healing and it requires the healing protection not only from women but also from men without giving up.

Works Cited:

Dai, Mamang. *The Legends of Pensam*. Penguin Random House Company, 2006.

Dash, Bishnu Charan. "Negotiating Cultural Ecology: An Ecocritical Trajectory into Mamang Dai's Poetry". *Srotoswini*, Vol-V, 2020-21, pp. 13-20.

Garrard, Greg. *Ecocriticism. The New Critical Idiom*. Replica Press Pvt. Ltd, 2004.

Misra, Tilottama. "Crossing Linguistic Boundaries: Two Arunachali Writers in Search of Readers". *The Oxford Anthology of Writings from North-East India Poetry and Essays*, edited by Misra. New Delhi OUP, 2011.

Nayar, Pramod K. *Contemporary Literary and Cultural Theory*. Dorling Kindersley (India) Pvt. Ltd., 2014.

Sebastian Sdb, A.J. *Quest for Identity in Contemporary Indian English Fiction and Poetry*. New Delhi: Adhyayan Publishers and Distributors, 2011.

Swami, Indu. *Exploring North-East Indian Writings in English*. Volume-1. Swarup Book Publishers Pvt. Ltd., 2011.