

Mamang Dai's Fiction: Sustaining Tribal Heritage Through Folklore

Dr. Shruti Shrivastava,
Asst. Prof., Dept. of English,
Government College Gharghoda,
Dist. Raigarh (C. G.), India

Abstract

Mamang Dai's fiction offers a deep and complex examination of tribal existence in Arunachal Pradesh, primarily focusing on the culture, mythology, and post-colonial experiences of the Adi community. *The Legends of Pensam* intricately outlines the 'in-between' realm where ancient animistic traditions meet modern influences, showcasing the difficulties of cultural adaptation. In *The Black Hill*, which earned her the prestigious Sahitya Akademi Award, she investigates a historical story situated in the 19th century, examining the fierce and frequently tense interactions between British colonial troops and the native Mishmi and Adi tribes. This novel adeptly illustrates the strength and nobility of a group deeply tied to their land, which is portrayed as a vibrant force that moulds their identity and struggle. Her latest novel, *Escaping the Land*, further explores this theme by addressing urgent modern issues like political unrest, environmental degradation—including the effects of illegal logging—and the persistent fight to preserve linguistic and cultural identity. Blending history, folklore and contemporary politics, the novel captures the tensions between traditional ways of living and the exploitative turn of modernization. Ultimately, Dai's body of work serves as a vital record of the Northeast, transforming oral history and tribal memory into a powerful literary assertion of identity. The present paper attempts to explore the unique experiences of the tribal people in the prominent novels of Mamang Dai.

Keywords: Northeast Indian Literature, Folklore, Adi tribe, Animism, Tribal Identity.

Mamang Dai, a former civil servant, journalist and poet from Arunachal Pradesh, gives us a glimpse of the North-East India in her writings. Known for its rich bio-diversity and abundant wild life, this part of the country is largely unidentified by the outside world. Engaging in fact and fiction Dai re-imagines the past of Arunachal Pradesh in her works. In the novels like *The Legends of Pensam* (2006), *The Black Hill* (2014) and *Escaping the Land* (2021), Dai transforms the vibrant oral traditions of her community into compelling English prose, safeguarding folklore and shared memory against the challenges of modernity.

Folklores are a kind of verbal messages, transmitted over generations, serving as the main tool for reconstructing the past. Jan Vansina in his book *Oral Tradition: A Study in Historical Methodology* states that, "the world inhabited by peoples without writing, oral tradition forms the main available source for a reconstruction of the past..." (1). Therefore, only through oral memories the unrecorded history of obscure past can be discovered. Mamang Dai reveals the collective memories expressed in folklore as a 'story of origin' that constitutes the cultural history of tribal people in Arunachal Pradesh.

While there are more than twenty-six major tribes in this part of the world, Mamang Dai brings to focus intricately woven stories of the 'Adi' tribe with their myths, legends, oral history and daily living patterns. A raconteur par excellence, Mamang brings her personal knowledge of the primitive customs and beliefs of her people to recount the folklores that influence the lives of Adis. Searching her own roots, she documents these tribal tales so that they are preserved and not lost and forgotten in the sweep of modernisation. She tells in an interview, "Ours is an oral tradition you know, I was trying to meet people and collect and record these oral narratives. You know, the small histories which were getting lost and when you talk to people even small things can trigger these memories off." ("Negotiating")

Mamang Dai's famous novel *The Legends of Pensam* is a collection of tales spanning several generations of a family. These tales reflect a half-revealed and half-concealed world, sometimes to be felt by the

subconscious rather than to be logically understood. The word ‘Pensam’ in the title signifies ‘in-between’. As the author herself puts it, “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 the 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” (*Legends* vii). There are a plethora of vivid characters steeped in traditional tribal beliefs and living vulnerable lives influenced by spirits, shamans and unnatural events.

The Adis follow “an animistic faith that is woven around forest ecology and co-existence with the natural world” (Rao), just like most of the tribes that live in the middle belt of Arunachal. Anything can happen in a person's life under the evil influence of spirits: husbands go astray, children have unusual ailments, homes are destroyed by fire, and people are slain inexplicably while hunting. These events occur because people of this or previous generations do not perform certain rites and rituals. The readers are introduced to the series of strange events in the very beginning, starting with the bizarre phenomena of persons being suddenly killed inside dense, thick forests. In another episode, Kamur, a completely sane person, attacks his wife and hacks his infant daughter. Although the village elders recognize the heinousness of his crime, they also accept his claim that he committed it in a “haunted” moment. Even though they deplore him, the populace is aware that “real could well be an illusion” and that “it was a nebulous zone that divided the worlds of spirits and men.” (*Legends* 31)

Shamans play a pivotal role in the tribal community as they have the power to drive away the bad spirits and restore some order in life. The great shaman of the Adi tribe is *miri*, the priest who is the preserver of the tribal myths and legends. Emphasizing the significance of *miri*, Mamang Dai writes in her essay in the book *Understanding Tribal Religion*, “And the role and importance of the *Miri* is inextricably linked with the myths and stories of the tribe as he chants and invokes and restores all the images from the beginning of time that offers a body of tradition that shapes our imagination and characterizes our attitudes towards certain fact and phenomenon” (“Nature” 88). Thus, the *miri* narrates a story of creation in the novel:

In the beginning, there was only Keyum. Nothingness. It was neither darkness nor light, nor had it any colour, shape or movement... Out of this nebulous Zone, a spark was born that was the light of imagination. The spark grew into a shining stream that was the consciousness of man, and from this all the stories of the world and all its creatures came into being (*Legends* 56).

Mamang Dai's *The Black Hill* represents history as a record of people fighting to keep their world from vanishing. The novel fabricates a story of Northeast tribes with a native spirit. Mingling fact and fiction, the novelist reconstructs the past of tribal community. Kailash C. Baral rightly says, “In the absence of authentic histories of most communities in Northeast, the creative writers have taken it upon themselves to be cultural historians. Their works provide us the resource for writing alternative histories” (Baral 8).

Set in the mist-shrouded hills of 19th-century Arunachal Pradesh, the novel tells a deeply human story of what happens when a quiet, ancestral way of life is suddenly interrupted by the arrival of the ‘Miglun’ – the outsider. The vicious history of east-west encounter has forced each side to be fearful of each other. The novelist writes about the tribes, “History had shown them that no matter how friendly they were, in the end the migluns brought only death and destruction” (*Black Hill* 192).

At the centre of this clash is the real-life figure of Father Nicolas Krick, a French priest whose obsession with reaching the forbidden land of Tibet leads him into the heart of tribal territory. Mamang Dai presents not just his missionary journey but the fear and confusion his presence stirs in the local Abor and Mishmi tribes. To them, Krick is not only a stranger; he is a herald of a colonial machine that they have already seen swallowing the Brahmaputra valley below. They resist his activities in their land. Kamisha, a Mishmi leader embodies this resistance, viewing the white man not merely as a physical invader but as a ‘Kla Kamphlung’ (stranger) whose presence would steal every bit of their lives by imposing foreign laws and eroding cultural memory. Tribal chief Zumsha says, “He is not a soldier. But we have to be alert. He is still a white foreigner - a *kla kamphlung*! Who knows about these people? To us they are all strangers”. (*Black Hill* 78) The tribals are aware of the British dominance in Assam and they are very sure that they do not want the ‘Migluns’ (as

they call the British) in their territory. So, they come together despite all the tensions that exist within them to guard the routes that lead to Tibet.

When the tribes set aside their internal rivalries to guard the paths to Tibet, it is not just a military policy. It is an act of desperate solidarity to protect their stories, their gods, and their freedom. Dai humanizes the rebels of colonial history, transforming them from nameless figures in a British journal into fathers, lovers, and protectors. No doubt, *The Black Hill* is a moving tribute to the resilience of the human spirit and the sacred, unbreakable connection between the people and the land they call home.

Mamang Dai's another novel *Escaping the Land* stands as a profound act of cultural empathy in the landscape of Indian literature. Centring the narrative on origin myths, shamanic practices, and the tragic legacy of internal slavery, Dai retrieves the unrepresented cultural history of the Adi community. By blending meticulously researched tribal lore with a poignant skill of imagination, she breathes life into the region's past.

For the Adi people, the myth of 'Kojum-Koja' is not a mere fable but an essential anchor of identity. Dai describes it as a place of happiness and hope, suggesting that the Adi consciousness is rooted in a celestial dignity that predates colonial or modern intervention:

...before everything else, there was the land of Kojum-Koja, a sacred place beyond the moon and stars. This was the first civilization from where man began his journey through the different heavens to descend into the world carrying stories of happiness and hope... (*Escaping* 90).

By invoking figures like 'Kiine Naane' (Mother Earth) and 'Nyanyi Mete' (the celestial Aunt of humans), Dai relates the tribe's relationship with nature. Through these deities, Dai emphasizes the Adis' intrinsic connection to the land and agriculture. Adis believe that all kinds of seeds and grains on the earth are available due to the blessings of 'Kiine Naane'. For Adis, the land is not a commodity; it is a maternal presence, a source of life and sustenance.

In the novel, Mamang Dai presents shamanism not as a superstition but as a vital form of communal healing. The Adi tribe has strong faith in shamanism. They believe that shamans can heal the sick, communicate with the spirit world, and bring back the dead souls. Dai presents this cultural belief through the portrayal of Rainman, a shaman who uses his magical power to bring rain, to turn into a tiger, and to make a dry stone weep.

Similarly, the history of 'Tadok' (precious beads) reveals the connection between spirit world and real world. Beads are an important part of tribal culture. The beads, symbolizing wealth and status, serve as a tangible link between the living and the spiritual, proving that for the Adis, the material and the mystical are inextricably linked. Tracing the history of the acquisition of 'Tadok', Dai relates that beads were given to men long ago by their spirit wives or lovers. Therefore, to honour and please the supernatural entities, men sacrifice animals like cattle, pig and fowl as an offering so that they may seek their blessings. Thus, Dai explains the cultural logic behind animal sacrifices. The story of a man from the Daji clan of Sirkung who was given a 'Tadok' by his spirit lover exemplifies this traditional belief.

Escaping the Land also serves as a critique of warfare and bondage. Dai refuses to romanticize the past as she confronts the evil practices of the slavery system and the era of inter-clan warfare. Through evocative prose, she describes the passive victims of this system – men and women who lost their identities, their memories, and their belonging:

the new generation of men adopted the clan title of their owner... They had no memory of the places they had been taken from... The thought of running away never crossed their minds. Where would they run to, and for what? Life was food and breath and that was all there was... (*Escaping* 44-45).

While the practices of war and slavery have ceased in Arunachal Pradesh, the memory of those who endured them remains an integral part of the region's social evolution.

In conclusion it can be said that Dai's work is marked by its genuine portrayal of tribal perspectives, where nature is central, and storytelling acts as an essential means for survival and cultural affirmation. Through her literature, Mamang Dai has established herself as an essential cultural historian and a powerful voice for native communities, bringing their environmental struggles to the forefront of Indian English literature and a global audience.

Works Cited

Baral, Kailash C. "Articulating Marginality: Emerging Literatures from Northeast India." *Emerging Literatures from Northeast India: The Dynamics of Culture, Society and Identity*, edited by Margaret Ch. Zama, Sage Publications India, 2013, pp. 3-12.

Dai, Mamang. *The Black Hill*. Aleph Book Company, 2014.

---. *Escaping the Land*. Speaking Tiger, 2021.

---. *The Legends of Pensam*. Penguin Books, 2006.

---. "The Nature of Faith and Worship among the Adis." *Understanding Tribal Religion*, edited by Tamo Mibang and Sarith K. Chaudhury, Mittal Publications, 2004, pp. 87-94.

---. "Negotiating Change with Memory." Interview by Subhash Jeyan. *The Hindu*, 3 Jan. 2010, www.thehindu.com.

Rao, G. S. P. Review of *The Legends of Pensam*, by Mamang Dai. *Muse India*, no. 10, Nov.-Dec. 2006, www.museindia.com.

Vansina, Jan. *Oral Tradition: A Study in Historical Methodology*. Translated by H. M. Wright, Routledge and Kegan Paul, 1965.



Copyright & License:

© Authors retain the copyright of this article. This work is published under the Creative Commons Attribution 4.0 International License (CC BY 4.0), permitting unrestricted use, distribution, and reproduction in any medium, provided the original work is properly cited.