

Indigenous Ecological Wisdom and Ecocritical Consciousness in Mamang Dai's *The Legends of Pensam*

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Abstract

This paper articulates the bonding between the Adi community with their environment, based on an eco-critical reading of Mamang Dai's *The Legends of Pensam* where myth, memory and ecological wisdom add to a novel interface over time. It asserts that, in addition to encapsulating indigenous environmental consciousness, Dai's narrative also critiques anthropocentrism by offering a cosmology of all-encompassing reciprocity, reverence and interdependence. Through an analysis of animistic beliefs, oral traditions, and place-based practices, this study focuses on the capacity for nature-informed consciousness to resist cultural erasure and environmental decline, inspired by eco-spiritualism, bioregionalism, and ecofeminism. At the same time, the paper critiques the disruptive forces of modernization, colonial intrusion, and the Anthropocene, which threaten to sever this delicate human-nature

bond. Through close textual analysis, supported by Dai's interviews and critical scholarship, the study demonstrates how *The Legends of Pensam* engages with pressing ecological concerns while offering a counter-narrative to homogenizing development discourses. By explicating the Adis' profound intimacy with their land and their resilient cultural memory, the novel bridges traditional ecological wisdom with contemporary environmental thought. Ultimately, this research accentuates how indigenous narratives like Dai's enrich ecocritical discourse and reaffirm that the survival of human society is inseparable from the vitality of the natural world.

Keywords: Ecocriticism, Indigenous Wisdom, Environmental Consciousness, Human-Nature Relationship, Oral Tradition

Introduction

The nuanced relationship between humanity and the natural world has long served as a profound wellspring for literary exploration across diverse cultures and historical epochs. In recent decades, the escalating global environmental crisis has propelled this thematic concern to the forefront of academic discourse, giving rise to ecocriticism as a vital theoretical framework. Ecocriticism, defined as "the study of the relationship between literature and the physical environment" (Glotfelty & Fromm, 1996, p. xviii), offers critical tools to examine how cultural texts shape, reflect, and challenge our attitudes toward nature. This interdisciplinary field extends beyond mere descriptions of landscapes to interrogate the ethical, social, and political ideologies. It underpins environmental degradation, fostering a deeper ecological consciousness. In the context of Indian English literature, this engagement with environmental themes is particularly pronounced, as "the relationship between nature and culture has been a recurring theme, reflecting the diverse landscapes and cultural tapestry of the subcontinent" (Sharma, 2021, p. 326).

Mamang Dai, a celebrated poet and novelist from Arunachal Pradesh, stands as a prominent voice within Northeast Indian literature, consistently focusing on the cultural and

natural landscapes of the region. Her acclaimed novel *The Legends of Pensam* (2006) offers a rich terrain for ecocritical analysis, presenting a unique perspective on the human-nature relationship. Dai's work adeptly merges "history, myth, tradition, memory, and fiction" (Malik, n.d., p. 123) to portray the unique ecology of the region. This paper asserts the novel's crucial role in revealing indigenous ecological wisdom and cultivating an ecocritical consciousness. It undertakes an ecocritical examination of *The Legends of Pensam* by delving into the theoretical dimensions of eco-spiritualism and bioregionalism. It aims to reveal how Dai's narrative techniques and thematic concerns challenge anthropocentric paradigms, offering a nuanced perspective on environmental degradation, cultural resilience, and the impact of modernization on traditional ecological systems. Ultimately, this research contributes to the growing body of ecocritical scholarship on Northeast Indian literature, highlighting the unique position of indigenous narratives in global environmental discussions.

Methodology

This study employs a qualitative textual analysis of Mamang Dai's novel, *The Legends of Pensam*, guided by an ecocritical framework to examine the intricate relationship between the Adi community and their environment. The analysis focuses on articulating the bonding of the Adi community with their environment through myth, memory, and ecological wisdom. Drawing on key theoretical concepts such as eco-spiritualism, bioregionalism, and ecofeminism, the research interprets the Adi worldview as a counter-narrative to anthropocentric perspectives and explores its symbolic representation of nature. The methodology involves a close reading of the primary text, supported by insights from critical scholarship and interviews with the author, to provide a nuanced understanding of how Dai's work reflects and shapes environmental consciousness. This approach allows for a comprehensive assessment of how literature not only mirrors ecological realities but also functions as a tool for preserving indigenous wisdom amidst modernization.

Theoretical Framework

Ecocritical theory has steadily evolved, sharpening its focus on how "the rhetoric of cultural texts reflects and informs material practices towards the environment while seeking to increase awareness" of ecological issues (Nayar, 2010, p. 241). At its core, ecocriticism takes "an earth-centred approach to the study of texts" (Garrard, 2012, p. 1), inviting readers to consider literature not in isolation but as deeply entangled with the natural world. This perspective is grounded in the understanding that "human culture is connected to the physical world, affecting it and affected by it," positioning ecocriticism, as Glotfelty (1996) puts it, with "one foot in literature and the other on land" (p. xix). Together, these views emphasize ecocriticism's dual commitment to interpreting textual representations of nature and elucidating the material realities they reflect, ultimately fostering a more conscious engagement with the environment through literature. Rather than simply examining literature-environment relationships, contemporary ecocriticism recognizes literature's dual role as both a mirror of ecological awareness and a catalyst for environmental consciousness and activism. This broader lens is particularly valuable for analyzing indigenous narratives, which often embody traditional ecological wisdom while resonating with modern ecocritical thought - a dynamic vividly present in Mamang Dai's *The Legends of Pensam*.

A significant recent shift in ecocritical studies involves the effort to decolonize its approaches, which prioritizes the inclusion of local ecological knowledge and historical contexts in literary analysis. This perspective is particularly crucial in the study of postcolonial literature, where the environment is understood not merely as a passive setting but as an active force intertwined with historical and cultural transformations (DeLoughrey & Handley, 2011).

A key theoretical lens for this study is eco-spiritualism, which brings to the fore the profound spiritual relationship between humanity and the natural world. Emerging from indigenous traditions, it views the divine not as distant or separate but as an active presence

within creation, experienced through human senses, intuition, and daily interaction with the environment. Eco-spiritualism encourages a life of balance, rooted in respect for all living beings and a commitment to avoid harming or exploiting the natural world (Dash, 2024). Among the Adi tribe, this belief system is deeply animistic, grounded in the understanding that all elements of nature - mountains, rivers, forests, and animals are imbued with spirit. Their rituals and practices are closely intertwined with the rhythms of the natural world, reflecting an enduring effort to sustain harmony and equilibrium within their environment (Satapathy & Nayak, 2020). This interconnected worldview resonates deeply with Mamang Dai's writings, where nature is not only central to cultural identity but also functions as a spiritual force that shapes human experience and belonging.

Another vital concept is bioregionalism, which views a "life-place" as a distinct region defined by natural rather than political boundaries (Aberley, 1999, as cited in Vandana, 2022, p. 27). This perspective suggests that human identity is shaped by our embeddedness in a larger community of natural beings, complementing national or ethnic identities. Bioregionalism values direct engagement with one's environment while also drawing on inherited knowledge from spiritual traditions and myths. Dai's narrative depicts the Adi community's deep familiarity with their landscape, including the seasonal rhythms of rain and the terrain. It closely aligns with bioregional thinking, highlighting their commitment to preserving both cultural and ecological integrity.

Finally, ecofeminism offers a lens to explore the interconnectedness of women and nature, emphasizing how both have historically faced similar patterns of subjugation under patriarchal systems. This perspective is particularly relevant for understanding the roles of women within the Adi community. Ecofeminism challenges rigid binaries between civilization and nature, instead advocating a holistic worldview rooted in interconnectedness and mutual care (Dey, 2016, as cited in Malik, n.d., p. 125).

These theoretical frameworks collectively provide a robust foundation for analyzing *The Legends of Pensam*, enabling a comprehensive exploration of how indigenous ecological wisdom and ecocritical consciousness are woven into the novel's narrative.

Indigenous Ecological Wisdom in *The Legends of Pensam*

Mamang Dai's *The Legends of Pensam* serves as a profound narrative exploration of indigenous ecological wisdom, deeply embedded within the Adi community's worldview. This wisdom stems from an animistic faith where the natural world is perceived not merely as a backdrop, but as a living entity with its own consciousness and agency. As Jana and Dutta (2021) explain, "According to the Adi tribes, the human world and the natural world are not two different entities; rather, they are complementary to each other" (p. 52). The Adi people's lives are intricately interwoven with their surroundings, reflecting a harmonious coexistence that predates modern interventions.

The novel richly illustrates the Adi's eco-spiritual beliefs, where the spiritual realm is deeply intertwined with human existence and the natural world, reflecting what Rahman and Sofi (2024) describe as "an animistic belief system that revolved around forest ecology and the symbiotic coexistence with the natural environment" (p. 512). This worldview is evident in their reliance on "spirits, rituals, [and] shamans," which, as Nani and Jafri (2023) note, shape both their cultural practices and responses to the natural world (p. j35). The belief in Biribik, the horned water serpent, exemplifies this relationship, where sightings are interpreted as omens of misfortune and lead to rituals such as the "serpent ritual" to restore balance (Satapathy & Nayak, 2020, p. 4). Similarly, the annual trek to harvest the "deadly aconitum" root is described as "nothing less than a pilgrimage," undertaken to appease "mighty spirits" and ensure a safe return (Choudhury & Chakraborty, 2017, p. 45). As Dai (2006) narrates, this practice not only embodies reverence for nature's power but also reflects a deep understanding that nature both sustains and demands respect.

The very concept of "*Pensam*," meaning "in-between" in the Adi language, symbolizes a liminal space where "anything can happen and everything can be lived" (Dai, 2006, p. vii). This worldview, as Vandana (2022) explains, challenges rigid boundaries between humans and non-humans and fosters a deep sense of interconnectedness. Dai elaborates on this in an interview, stating that the "*Aabang*," their classical literature, embodies "the aspirations, the spiritual longings, in the life of man" (Dai, as cited in Prodhani & Kuhad, 2022, p. 2). The oral traditions transmitted through shamans serve as a means of cultural preservation, helping the Adi people maintain their distinct identity through shared folklore elements including tales, beliefs, and customs (Nani & Jafri, 2023)

The novel also resonates strongly with the principles of bioregionalism, as Vandana (2022) argues in her analysis of how Dai's work represents "counter-tradition" narratives that resist homogenizing forces through place-based aesthetics (p. 29). The Adi community's life is deeply intertwined with the specific geographical features of the Siang valley. The vivid descriptions of the intense rainy season, where "it can rain non-stop for sixty-two days at a time," reveal the community's intimate knowledge of their environment (Dai, 2006, p. 37). This deep understanding of their natural surroundings shapes their sustainable practices and reinforces their sense of place, emphasizing a reciprocal relationship where "they make it a point to take only what is required" (Choudhury & Chakraborty, 2017, p. 45). The identity of the Adi people is profoundly tied to the mountains and valleys they inhabit, a deep bond articulated when the land itself seems to communicate: "This is your land. Whatever happens, there is nothing to fear" (Dai, 2006, p. 68).

The Impact of Modernization and the Anthropocene in *The Legends of Pensam*

While Dai's narrative celebrates indigenous ecological wisdom, it simultaneously provides a poignant and critical look at the encroaching forces of modernization and the damaging effects of the Anthropocene. The novel vividly captures the pervasive human

influence on the landscape, often to its detriment, reflecting the Anthropocene's central premise where human activity is the predominant force shaping the environment. This resonates with Clark's view that literary strategies must exceed "conventional human-scaled frameworks" to engage with "the vast and variegated materialities of planetary crisis" (as cited in Dhivyalakshmi, 2025, pp. 129-130). The Adi community, whose traditional way of life "was in rapport with pristine nature," is now depicted in a context where "the social, economic, political, and developmental changes in the land have affected their life and how they have reacted against these changes" (Malik, n.d., pp. 126–127).

A central symbol of this intrusion is the construction of roads. The narrative links the arrival of "migluns" (Britishers) and modernization to the building of the "famous and mysterious Stilwell road" (Dai, 2006, p. 40). This project, intended to bring "civilization" to a previously "uncivilized" territory (Jana & Dutta, 2021, p. 53), is depicted with a tone of foreboding. The road is described as a "red gash" running up "the mountain like a "broken ladder of crumbling earth stained with iron ore" (Dai, 2006, p. 148). Instead of bringing promised benefits, the road emerges as a symbol of ecological injury and an interface for unwelcome societal changes. As Larik laments, the road brings "Outsiders. Thieves. Diseases" (Dai, 2006, p. 156). The "old days of war and valour had vanished" as the Adis had "surrendered ancestral lands to the government and now the road and the things that came with it seemed to be strangling them and threatening to steal their identity like a thief" (Dai, 2006, pp. 156-157). This transformation starkly illustrates how state-driven development, framed as progress, often operates as a vehicle of dispossession and cultural erosion for indigenous communities.

The consequences of this change are depicted with stark imagery that contrasts sharply with the earlier lyrical descriptions of nature. The town, Gurdum, is described as being "permanently awash in debris" with "Plastic floated across the hills, clung to river banks,

perched on trees" (Dai, 2006, p. 164). This imagery symbolizes a broader ecological crisis where nature is suffocated by non-biodegradable human-made materials. The novel also portrays the moral and ethical decay that accompanies environmental degradation. Young men on motorcycles and a volleyball team disqualified for a player "holding a bottle of beer" illustrate the cultural dissonance and shifting values in the community (Dai, 2006, p. 188). This "lure of modern life" is shown to preoccupy the soul of the people, creating an alarming disconnect from their deep-rooted natural connections (Choudhury & Chakraborty, 2017, p. 50). Dai's careful representation of these changes positions the novel as a cautionary tale about the irreversible changes humans impose on the earth, reminding readers of the urgent need for sustainable practices.

Nature's Resilience and Community Response

In counterpoint to the destructive forces of modernization, *The Legends of Pensam* also presents a powerful narrative of nature's resilience and the Adi community's enduring response to change. Dai's depiction of the natural world challenges the idea of it as a passive victim, instead portraying it as a dynamic, responsive force. This is congruent with the ecocritical notion that nature is not merely a backdrop, but an agential force capable of retaliating against the systemic violence wreaked upon it. This is evident in the novel's portrayal of natural events, such as the destructive earthquake of 1950, where "the earth opened up and hills were swallowed" (Dai, 2006, p. 126). This event is seen not just as a random tragedy but as a manifestation of nature's formidable power, a reminder that it cannot be controlled or taken for granted. Similarly, the myth of the Kojum-Koja tribe, who were "literally washed out" with "storm and driving rain" after destroying an element of nature (Chowdhury, 2021, pp. 85-86), serves as a cautionary tale about the consequences of disrespecting the natural world.

Despite the encroachment of modern life, the Adi community, like nature itself, demonstrates a profound resilience. This resistance is often manifested through the

preservation of their cultural memory and oral traditions. The novel shows how old people, even as they "turn slowly in their sleep as the fires burn down to a heap of ash," still possess a deep connection to their land and its rhythms (Dai, 2006, p. 4). The community's identity is not defined by external changes but by their shared myths, legends, and stories. As Mamang Dai states in an interview, oral tradition provides their "sense of community and thereby our sense of identity" (Prodhani & Kuhad, 2022, p. 3). The continuity of these traditions is celebrated in the novel through events like the cultural show in Pigo town, which "intelligently exchanges thoughts of old-style presentations and new modern and advanced talents" (Sarkar & Rai, 2023, p. 60). This event, "decorated with freshly cut bamboo sticks," while incorporating modern elements, demonstrates a deliberate effort to preserve and showcase cultural heritage amidst ongoing change (Dai, 2006, p.114)

The novel also highlights the individual's ability to find solace and strength in nature, reinforcing the core tenets of eco-spiritualism. Characters like Nenem, who felt "immediately restored" when she faced the mountains and felt the river breeze after a period of illness, embody this therapeutic connection (Dai, 2006, p. 95). Her deep bond with the land is so profound that she chooses to stay in her village over her British lover, David, stating, "No one dies of love. I loved him, and now I am enough on my own" (Dai, 2006, p. 109). This act of choosing her land over a foreign life is a powerful assertion of her bioregional identity and a form of resistance against a colonial mindset. Her eventual death, caused by the heartbreak of seeing the land changed by the earthquake, further solidifies her symbolic connection to nature; for Hoxo, she was "like the river, constant, nurturing, self-possessed. Like the river, she was the soul of our land" (Dai, 2006, p. 121).

Conclusion

Mamang Dai's *The Legends of Pensam* stands as a powerful attestation to the inseparable bond between culture and ecology. By weaving myth, memory, and place-based

knowledge into its fabric, the novel presents an alternative vision of the world—one that resists anthropocentric narratives and foregrounds a holistic, eco-spiritual understanding of existence. Through its portrayal of the Adis' animistic beliefs and their deep-rooted connection to the Siang Valley, Dai invites readers to reconsider how identity, belonging, and survival are tied to the land.

Yet, the novel is far from idyllic. Its stark depictions of ecological injury and cultural dislocation expose the fraught realities of modernization and the Anthropocene. The image of the "red gash" of the Stilwell Road or the debris-filled town of Gurdum confronts us with the costs of unchecked development, both environmental and moral. Still, Dai tempers this critique with moments of resilience seen in the endurance of oral traditions, rituals, and nature's regenerative power. Characters like Nenem, who embody this intimate kinship with the land, remind us of what is at stake and what remains possible.

In tracing these tensions, this paper positions Dai's work at the intersection of literature, ecology, and indigenous knowledge. It demonstrates how her narrative not only preserves a vanishing worldview but also intervenes in larger environmental debates, offering a model of coexistence grounded in humility and care. Ultimately, the wisdom embedded in *The Legends of Pensam* compels us to listen to the land, to its people, and to the stories that hold both together. Such narratives do more than chronicle loss; they call us to imagine a future shaped by respect for the earth and an awareness of our shared dependence upon it.

Conflict of Interest: The corresponding author, on behalf of the second author, confirms that there are no conflicts of interest to disclose.

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