

Tribal Lives and Women's Voices: An Ethnographic Reading of Fiction from North East India

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Abstract

This research paper explores the intersection of tribal identity and women's voices in contemporary fiction from Northeast India, focusing on the works of Temsula Ao and Mamang Dai. Employing an ethnographic approach, the study investigates how novelists use storytelling to document traditions, cultural rituals, social hierarchies, and the lived experiences of women in marginalized communities. Texts such as *These Hills Called Home* and *The Legends of Pensam* are analysed to illustrate the ways authors combine folklore, oral history, and intricate depictions of landscape and kinship. The findings reveal that these literary works not only preserve cultural memories but also foreground strategies of female agency and resilience amid patriarchal constraints and historical change. By situating literature as both an archive and an act of interpretation, the paper highlights the important role women writers play in expanding and challenging the representation of tribal life in Indian literature.

Keyword: Tribal, women, Manang Dai, Literature

Introduction

The literature of Northeast India stands apart for its nuanced depiction of tribal existence, an intricate tapestry of customs, rituals, and social relationships rooted in oral tradition. Amid a broader Indian literary sphere that has often marginalized frontier narratives, writers like Temsula Ao and Mamang Dai have carved space for stories anchored in the everyday realities of communities at the geographical and cultural margins. Their works serve as cultural archives, embracing details that anthropological accounts sometimes miss: the cadence of song, the careful negotiation of kinship, the intricate meaning of landscape places, and, critically, the experiences of women negotiating tradition and change.

This paper undertakes an ethnographic reading of selected fiction by Ao and Dai, focusing on how their narratives document tribal lives and elevate women's voices within their communities. The rationale for this approach is twofold. First, fiction offers an interpretive window into lived realities capable of capturing both the poetic beauty and the emotional depth of cultural belonging. Second, the act of representation itself is transformative: Ao and Dai do not merely describe their communities, they intervene in debates about identity, memory, and agency. Their female characters are neither silent observers nor archetypes but active participants in social life, bearing witness to all its ambiguities.

The significance of women's voices in Northeast Indian fiction cannot be overstated. In stories such as Ao's *These Hills Called Home* and Dai's *The Legends of Pensam*, women navigate both patriarchal structures and the uncertainty wrought by modernity. Their journeys echo broader processes of cultural preservation and adaptation, as narrators and agents shaping the contours of tradition. This interplay between literary storytelling and social reality is central to the ethnographic reading advanced here.

The paper will first survey relevant scholarship on tribal writing and ethnography in

fiction, establishing a critical context for analysis. It will then outline the methodological approach, before moving to a series of close readings aimed at uncovering the layered depiction of tribal life and feminine agency. In synthesizing these findings, the discussion will reflect on the wider implications for understanding memory, resistance, and cultural change in literature from Northeast India. Ultimately, this research argues that by intertwining ethnographic insight and narrative imagination, writers like Ao and Dai enrich literary studies and provide vital testimony to the lived histories of their communities.

Literature Review

The literature of Northeast India has gradually carved a space in the larger field of Indian English writing, breaking long-standing silences around ethnic, tribal, and gendered experiences. Early scholarship on tribal communities often leaned toward anthropological and sociological description, focusing on oral histories, customary law, and the effects of colonial and postcolonial policies (Baruah, 2003; Elwin, 1958). However, recent decades have witnessed a decisive shift: contemporary women writers now harness fiction as a means of ethnographic testimony, literary resistance, and cultural memorialization.

Temsula Ao and Mamang Dai are central to this shift, and their works are increasingly the subject of literary and interdisciplinary analysis. Ao's *These Hills Called Home: Stories from a War Zone* and Dai's *The Legends of Pensam* exemplify narratives where storytelling functions as both preservation and protest where fiction internalizes and reinterprets the ethnographic gaze, refusing the outsider's perspective in favour of lived, local knowledge (Chawla, 2021; Singh, 2018). Critics have noted how these texts evoke a "politics of memory," recording trauma and survival not through abstract anthropology but through layered, affective storytelling (Rupkatha Journal, 2020).

Ethnographic approaches in literary studies have matured alongside this trend, moving beyond fieldwork and factual ethnology to embrace the interpretive possibilities of

fiction. Clifford Geertz's concept of "thick description" (1973) has influenced scholars seeking deeper meaning behind narrative detail, especially the symbolic codes embedded in ritual, landscape, and language. Postcolonial theory (Spivak, 1988; Bhabha, 1994) further enriches this dialogue, foregrounding questions of power, voice, and the politics of representation concerns especially acute for Northeast Indian communities negotiating both internal difference and external marginalization.

The representation of women's voices in tribal fiction is a developing but vibrant field. Ao and Dai's female characters often stand at a crossroads between continuity and change, negotiating patriarchal constraints, generational expectations, and modern challenges (Bhattacharya, 2017; Devi, 2016). Several studies have analysed the negotiation of agency, tradition, and trauma in these narratives, noting that oral storytelling, landscape, and ritual provide unique strategies for expressing resistance and claiming space (Jha, 2022; Baruah, 2020). In contrast to earlier texts by male writers, women's fiction more consistently foregrounds interiority, relationality, and the quiet labour of community-building.

Despite these advances, gaps remain in the scholarship. Much research still treats ethnography and literature as separate endeavours, rather than interwoven practices. There are calls for more nuanced readings that place ethnographic detail within the wider frame of narrative technique and cultural politics especially as fiction offers a dynamic archive, one capable of recording local specificity while opening dialogues with universal questions of identity and power (Prakash, 2019). Similarly, there's a need for comparative studies that move beyond the dominant binaries of "centre vs. margin" to trace the varied strategies employed by women writers across tribal communities.

In synthesizing existing debates, this paper positions itself at the confluence of literary analysis and ethnographic reading: using fiction as a site where lived knowledge, collective memory, and gendered experience interact, and where Northeast Indian women's

perspectives disrupt and enrich the mainstream discourses of Indian literature.

Methodology

This paper adopts an ethnographic reading of contemporary fiction from Northeast India, focusing specifically on the works of Temsula Ao and Mamang Dai as representative voices from Nagaland and Arunachal Pradesh, respectively. Ethnography, in this literary context, does not merely signify the descriptive study of customs or rituals. Instead, it reflects an interpretive approach in which fiction serves as both vessel and agent of cultural storytelling, allowing readers insight into the intricacies of communal memory, gender relations, and lived experience (Dai, 2005; Baral, 2013).

Drawing inspiration from autoethnographic theory, especially the dialogic dimension emphasized by Ellis and Bochner (2016), the methodology foregrounds how authors narrativize their communities from within, positioning their own subjectivity in dialogue with tradition, myth, and changing realities. Dai's positioning as an "ethnographic exemplar" and Ao's own role as a chronicler of shifting landscapes underscore the value of insider testimony, where the boundaries between observer and participant are consciously blurred, and where self-representation challenges outsider paradigms.

The selection of primary texts is informed by the critical recognition of *The Legends of Pensam* and *These Hills Called Home* as literary records of tribal ontology, oral tradition, and communal belonging. Each work is examined for its narrative strategies voice, point of view, symbolism, and use of ecological and ritual detail which together evoke the polysemic subjectivity of Northeast Indian communities. Special attention is given to the representation of women's voices, as these not only mediate the intersection of gender and ethnic identity but also provide a nuanced critique of patriarchal and colonial histories (Misra, 2015).

While incorporating close reading as a methodological core, analysis is enriched by comparative perspectives drawn from relevant poetry and criticism, ensuring that the

diversity of women's experience and the complexity of tribal realities are given full scope. Ultimately, the process privileges empathy, reflexivity, and engagement with indigenous modes of knowing a movement away from rigid frameworks and toward an evolving, dialogic ethnographic practice.

Results

A close reading of Temsula Ao's *These Hills Called Home* and Mamang Dai's *The Legends of Pensam* reveals a textured ethnography embedded within narrative form, a literature that becomes living testimony to the practices, beliefs, and tensions shaping tribal life in Northeast India.

Tribal Customs and Everyday Life:

Ao's stories are rich with the rhythms of daily existence among the Ao-Naga tribe. Village scenes unfold with attention to ritual harvest celebrations, mourning traditions, the communal sharing of food, and seasonal migration, capturing both the predictability and fragility of life in the hills. Dai, similarly, populates her fictional world of Pensam with characters whose days are structured by cycles of planting, spiritual observance, and the exchange of legends that situate the community "in between" worlds. This embeddedness in tradition conveys not static nostalgia, but ongoing negotiation; as elders instruct children in lore and custom, they also reckon with the disruptions of memory, migration, or external influence.

Landscape and Belonging:

Landscape is more than backdrop, it is a living protagonist. The hills, rivers, and forests function as repositories of collective history. In Ao's stories, the land is witness to both joy and violence, its contours shaped by stories and the consequences of abandonment or exploitation. Dai's *The Legends of Pensam* similarly entwines place and identity; her descriptions of forest rituals, river journeys, and the deep silences of the night serve both as

acts of remembrance and as warnings against the loss of ancestral wisdom. Both writers evoke the landscape as contested and sacred, giving voice to the ways territory becomes a source of pride, trauma, and cultural survival.

Women's Roles and Voices:

Women occupy pivotal roles within these ethnographic narratives. They are stewards of memory, carriers of oral tradition, and mediators of social cohesion. Ao's female characters are often found at thresholds between generations, customs, and conflicting desires. Their agency surfaces not in overt rebellion, but through subtle negotiations: the transmission of stories, the conduct of rituals, the maintenance of relational networks in times of crisis. Dai's portrayals similarly highlight women as creators and keepers of continuity, their voices threading through the legends of Pensam, shaping both what is remembered and what is reimagined. The experience of marginalization and resilience is thus rendered with nuance, never reducing women to metaphor but granting them full participation in the construction of communal identity.

Ritual, Folklore, and Oral Tradition:

Both authors weave ethnographic detail into narrative texture through ritual and storytelling. Folklore is not a static inheritance but a dynamic resource, adapted to shifting social realities. Ao draws on the oral histories of the Ao-Naga, rendering supernatural encounters, omens, and taboos with careful attention to how they inflect everyday choice. Dai, meanwhile, stages her interlinked tales in Pensam around the telling and retelling of myths, where spirits,

shape-shifting figures, and ancestral voices remind characters of the limits and possibilities of their world. Through this lens, oral tradition becomes a means of survival, sustenance, and subtle critique.

Negotiation of Change and Modernity

Ethnographic testimony in these works does not shy away from depicting transition. Both Ao and Dai confront questions of cultural assimilation, historical loss, and the intrusion of outside authority. Their protagonists struggle with the erosion of ritual, the spread of new religions, and the economic and political forces that press against tribal autonomy. Yet, their stories are neither entirely tragic nor utopian. Instead, they register the complexity of adaptation, foregrounding the work of women as negotiators of both preservation and transformation. Examples abound: the negotiation of Christian beliefs with ancestral ritual, the refiguring of kinship under urban migration, and the forging of new forms of community in response to trauma or change.

To conclude, the results of this ethnographic reading bring forth a multifaceted portrait of tribal life shaped by custom, landscape, and the persistent, inventive agency of women. Fiction, in the hands of Ao and Dai, becomes a vessel for both cultural continuity and critical inquiry, a literature deeply rooted, yet ever open to the shifting ground beneath its feet.

Discussion

The results drawn from the works of Temsula Ao and Mamang Dai demonstrate how ethnographic fiction transforms the act of cultural documentation into an imaginative, lived practice. This synthesis is not merely a record of customs or rituals, but a dynamic reworking of identity, memory, and resistance, one that invites readers to inhabit both the everyday joys and ambiguities of tribal existence.

A striking feature of both Ao's and Dai's narratives is the manner in which women's voices traverse and shape communal memory. Rather than portraying female characters as passive bearers of tradition, both authors foreground their involvement in the negotiation of history and the adaptation of inherited customs. The rituals women perform, the stories they

tell, and the choices they make contribute substantively to the evolving identity of their communities. In Dai's *The Legends of Pensam*, for example, the interconnected tales hinge on women's storytelling, their capacity to bridge generational divides, and the quiet strength that underpins the "in between" nature of *Pensam*. Ao's *These Hills Called Home* similarly presents women not as archetypes but as individuals whose actions small and large mediate the tension between past and present.

The decision to centre landscape and place in these narratives further deepens the ethnographic dimension. In both authors' works, territory is inseparable from belonging, and environmental change often signals deeper cultural loss. As Dai's prose intertwines rivers, forests, and hills with communal rituals, she articulates a worldview where nature is animate, spiritually charged, and intimately connected to kinship networks. Ao's stories echo these motifs, rendering the hills of Nagaland as both witness and participant in the unfolding drama of survival. This eco-centric perspective opens avenues for understanding how tribal fiction interprets environment not only as setting, but as archive, interlocutor, and source of resistance.

Importantly, both writers resist binary framings of tradition versus modernity. Instead, their fiction explores lives in transition spaces where new beliefs, practices, and relationships arise out of negotiation rather than rupture. The adoption of Christianity, the reach of education and migration, and the aftermath of political violence figure prominently in their texts, challenging static notions of tribal purity. The role of women as cultural negotiators is particularly evident here, as they move between ancestral rites and the imperatives of a fast-changing society. This layered approach enriches the anthropological value of Ao's and Dai's work, but does so without sacrificing literary subtlety or emotional candour.

What emerges is a vision of ethnography that privileges agency and multiplicity.

Fiction, in this sense, becomes an ongoing dialogue a place where myth, lived experience, and critical reflection intersect. Oral history and folklore, rather than mere repositories of the past, serve as resources for assessing the present and imagining futures. The adaptability of storytelling, its capacity to welcome voices long excluded from written archives, is crucial to this project. Through narrative, both authors enable tribal communities to articulate pain, longing, humour, and hope in their own terms.

From a broader literary perspective, the achievements of Ao and Dai signal a shift in how Northeast Indian tribal fiction is read and valued. Their attentiveness to women's perspectives, to the affective resonance of landscape and ritual, and to the ethical complexities of memory, mark their writing as a challenge to anthropological reductionism. Instead of treating communities as objects of study, these works insist upon relationality they foster engagement, empathy, and respectful listening.

The discussion, hence, underscores the transformative role of fiction as ethnography in Northeast Indian contexts: a layered testimony that records, questions, and renews tribal identity through the prism of women's lived experience. Ao and Dai's writing affirms the enduring importance of narrative as a site of agency, cultural negotiation, and communal renewal, opening new pathways for understanding the plural histories and futures of the region.

Conclusion

This study set out to examine how contemporary fiction from Northeast India, particularly the works of Temsula Ao and Mamang Dai, serves as an ethnographic archive of tribal life and women's voices. Through close analysis of their narratives, the paper has shown that ethnographic reading in literature can recover forgotten customs, render complex landscapes, and foreground the agency of women negotiating both continuity and change. The textured portrayal of everyday rituals, oral traditions, and adaptive resilience reveals the

profound capacity of fiction not merely to document but to interpret and reimagine social realities from within.

Both Ao and Dai illuminate the deep entanglement between culture, gender, and memory, offering readers stories that resist reduction and honor multiplicity. Their writing challenges the boundaries between anthropology and narrative art, suggesting that the most meaningful understanding of tribal communities emerges from nuanced storytelling and empathetic engagement. The ongoing negotiation of identity both personal and communal is reflected in their inventive narrative choices and richly humanized characters.

On a concluding note, this research points to the necessity of further comparative and interdisciplinary work on Northeast Indian women's fiction, advocating for continued attention to its ethnographic, literary, and critical strengths. Such engagement ensures that the diverse histories and voices of the region remain vital to contemporary discussions of literature, culture, and identity.

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

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