

AN ECOFEMINIST STUDY OF MAMANG DAI'S THE LEGENDS OF PENSAM

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Abstract

*The paper is an attempt to study Mamang Dai's *The Legends of Pensam* from an ecofeminist point of view. Through close examination of the novel's representation of the myths, legends, rituals, customs and social system of the Adi tribe, the study brings forth the deep interconnection that exist between women and nature. It explores how women and nature experienced the same exploitation from men and shows how nature in turn functions as a therapeutic medium that consoles women and erases their loneliness, detachment and passivity in the face of patriarchy. The paper grounded the manner in which women and nature are deeply connected through their reproductive abilities while depicting the exploitative nature of patriarchy which devalue the act of nurturing and giving life. Most importantly, the study questions the cultural myth of Man the Hunter and critically explores how hunting, the culturally accepted system of oppression degrades the value of women that deteriorates their status.*

Keywords: Women, nature, hunting, ecofeminism, men etc.

The Legends of Pensam is a book written by an Arunachali writer Mamang Dai. It was published in 2006, and became the most well-known and influencing literary work from the North Eastern region of India. Mamang Dai is a former member of the Indian administrative, a journalist, a poet and a novelist. She is often regarded as one of the most intensely poetic voices from the Northeast India. The enthusiastic reception of her literary works has rightly acknowledged her importance as a significant writer from Northeast India. Though her book *Arunachal Pradesh: The Hidden Land*, and her debut collection *River Poems* testifies her creativity as a poet and a writer, her talent and originality finds its best expression in *The Legends of Pensam*.

The Legends of Pensam is an affecting work that intertwines myth, legends, history and memoir to record the life stories of the Adi tribe of Arunachal Pradesh to which Mamang Dai herself belongs to. The word 'Pensam' as the author puts it means in- between, "it

suggests the middle, or the middle ground, but it may also be interpreted as the hidden spaces of the heart where a secret garden grows.”(Dai 1). Set in the beautiful Siang River Valley, the different stories narrated in the novel deals with tribal myths, legends, folklore and the social role of Adi women which have a powerful note of ecofeminism.

Ecofeminism as a branch of feminist philosophy strongly advocates the view that women and nature are connected in morally significant ways, as both are identified with femininity or traits labelled ‘feminine’. Femininity, as seen by ecofeminists is associated with characteristics ranging from fecundity to vulnerability and to wilderness, and is a source of ecological and social flourishing that has been violently degraded in patriarchal culture. Ecofeminist, therefore takes women and nature to be connected. Both accepted as provider of life, sustenance and creativity, whose strength has been similarly violated and controlled by men. Greta Gaard in her book *Ecofeminism: Women, Animals, Nature* rightly mentions the relation between women and nature:

“The category ‘women’ and ‘animals’ serve the same symbolic function in patriarchal society. Their construction as dominated, submissive ‘other’ in theoretical discourse has sustained human male dominance. The role of women and animals in post-industrial society is to serve/be served up; women and animals are the used.”
(Gaard 61)

Women and nature connection, the basic tenant of ecofeminism is reaffirmed by Mamang Dai in *The Legends of Pensam*. The third section of the novel entitled “Daughters of the Village” renders the image of Adi women who engaged themselves in their daily chores and who at the same time maintained an intimate bond with nature. Living in the ‘in-between’ world, between myth and reality, between nature and human beings, Adi women carried out their task as dutiful nurturer and provider. The picture of steep hill climbing as painted out in the novel permits no speech to women. With heavy baskets on their back, and with their hearts beating and pumping out loud, they climb the unforgiving hills, carrying out their heavy burden as women. Living in patriarchal society they have to confine themselves in household works such as- cooking, childcare, fetching fuel wood, collection of forest procedure, preparation and preservation of foods. Within the realms of marriage, they are expected to spend all their life as provider. When the narrator talked about her mother, she vividly disclosed the plight of Adi women:

“They asked her to remember the good times and said what a good homemaker she had been as the eldest daughter, as a wife and mother. There was always food in your house. They told her.” (Dai 97)

Being a woman, the worth of Adi women are measured depending on how they carried out household works. They have been praised and valued as a good homemaker and have no life beyond that.

Even though the Adi women are tightly engaged in their domestic life, nature as a nurturer soothes their pain and weariness. For the Adi women, whose life has been closely

knitted with their surroundings, their survivals depend on nature. Jungle has been cleared for cultivation, seeds have been sown, the earth itself nurtured the planted seeds, and later it provides them food. Both nature and women connected themselves as the womb of production. Both are the caregiver, the nurturer and the provider. As both are closely linked together, nature played an important role in soothing and calming the weariness of women. In the novel, the narrator expresses the freedom rendered to women by nature, “the work is hard, but scouring the forest the women could at least stop, stretch and talk to each other” (Dai 73). In their busy scheduled life, women could gain solace and freedom only when they enter the forest, in the absence of all social rules and norms. This indeed discloses the intimate connection that exists between women and nature.

Ecofeminist philosophy suggests that women and nature are connected morally because both shared their feminine features. Women and nature together ensures continuity of life and the offerings they rendered to human and other creation are similar. The novel again reveals women and nature connection through Nenem, a female character. The picture of Nenem in isolation with their domesticated animals expresses the harmonious and inseparable link shared by women and nature. As narrated in the novel:

“the green of living! The young shoots of plants, the sun and dew. The living mud, the stirring of worms. Nenem smiled to see the duck’s great hunger and rejoiced in her performance and release.” (Dai 112)

The feeding of the duck which gave her a sense of satisfaction and happiness springs from the feminine quality in her. From the ecofeminist point of view, it is the feminine quality of women that makes women understand nature.

The cultural myth of ‘Man the Hunter’ has long served as a metaphor for men’s relationship with other humans, non-humans, animals and the world in general. According to this myth, the hunters destructive, competitive and violent activity directed towards his prey is what originally distinguishes man from animal. Lori Gruen in her essay *Dismantling Oppression: An Analysis of the Connection between Women and Animals* expresses her view on this myth by saying, “the myth serves not only to posit an essential difference between man and animal, but also to elevate man because of his ability to systematically destroy animals” (62).

In the culture of man, the act of killing is what establishes the superiority of man over animals, and that behaviour of such is naturalised and exalted. In Northeast India, hunting is deeply rooted in the traditions of different tribes occupying the region. The value and honour of man is measured depending on the amount of animals killed in a hunt. Through hunting, men of the tribes aims to attain the coveted title which will prove their worth and masculinity.

The Legend of Pensam records the dominating cultural myth of ‘Man the Hunter’ which is prevalent among the tribes of Northeast India. In the novel, Mamang Dai reflects the centrality of hunting among the tribes of Arunachal Pradesh. In the first section of the book

'A Dairy of the World', hunting is introduced as the sport of men which brings death among the hunter and the hunted. The novel renders the picture of a mild summer morning when Adi men set out on a hunt in the area where a deer came to feed on the wild fruit that litters the forest floor. Another picture can be drawn from the novel where Loma, the male character mistaken his friend Kalen for a monkey and shoot him death. Both the pictures disclose the dominating and destructive actions of man which is indeed supplemented by his anthropocentric cultural ideals and values. Even though many men lost their lives in hunting, the Adi men never stop the hunting sport and instead used their success in killing animals as a means to prove their status as men.

The cultural myth of 'Man the Hunter' has been scrutinized by ecofeminist as the beginning of women and nature subjugation. Lori Gruen again expresses this acceptance in her essay by writing:

"creating a history in which man is separate from and superior to animals, establish a mechanism in which a separation from women can be grounded. In this account of human social evolution, woman's body prevents her from participating in the hunt, and thus relegate her to the arena of non-culture. Woman's non-participation is conceived as naturally inferior"(Gaard 61)

The statement vividly demonstrates that, in patriarchal society, values has been given in taking life, while giving life and nurturing becomes less important. In the novel, the dualistic portrayal of men and women has been made. In the first chapter, 'The Boy Who Fell from the Sky', hunting is portrayed as a fearsome action. Hoxo's father is shot death as he is mistaken for a deer. Again, in the second chapter, 'The Strange Case of Kalen the Hunter' Kalen is mistaken for a monkey and is shot death in their hunting field. This portrayal centres men's act of hunting as deathly and destructive, while women's action are submissive and docile.

In the novel, Mamang Dai shows how the Adi women are subjected by hunting. Being smaller, weaker and reproductive, women belonging to Adi tribe are excluded from the sport of hunting, their exclusion signifies their status as inferior to men. While men went out exercising their power in the acts of killing, women are confined at home, working for their absent husbands and families. Whenever their husbands came home from hunting they will ran out welcoming them. Instead of performing heroic act alongside men, they merely function as helpers and admirers of men's deeds.

As portrayed in the novel, hunting not only degrades the values of women, but it also makes them a slave to a patriarchal system. In the second chapter, when Kalen died in hunting accident, the narrator reveals the plight of his wife:

"Kalen's widow, Omum, now lived with his parents. She had two small 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 evening fire, fed the pigs and chickens and carried on with her life without stopping to pine or utter

recriminations”. (Dai 15)

This narration highlights how hunting degrades the life of a married woman to a widow. Life of a widow in a patriarchal society is no less miserable. The death of her husband does not free her from the shackles of domination. Rather, she still has to render domestic service to her deceased husband’s family and provide their needs. Hunting defines her as a weaker being, and to double her miseries it lowers her status to a widow. A transference from a husband to a husband family’s property. Constructed in this way, patriarchy establishes the subservient status of woman and nature, reducing both as the subject of domination.

In general, ecofeminist philosophy blends the insight of feminism and ecology. It establishes its ethics on the basis of criticism of the tendency to dominate both women and nature. It parallels the oppression of women and nature, and therefore aims at the liberation of both. In *The Legends of Pensam*, the exploitation of nature which is the results of man’s anthropocentric action and the oppression of women can be link together. The third section of the novel, ‘A Matter of Times’ portrays how the destructive forces of mankind harmed the land. New roads have been built in the village Pigo which remained mysterious and remote for a long time. The ground has been dug up and the land itself has been tortured. The narrator described the wounding of nature by saying:

“There were also whispers that the road was inauspicious. Everyone believed in the story of the red pool, the colour of blood where ghostly fish swam round and round wearing bells that tickled and drove strong men to acts of murderous violence”.

(Dai 149)

The story of the red pool has been used as a metaphor to expose the violent acts of mankind. The building of road which has been disguised as a form of development for the tribe destroyed the land. Men with their murderous instincts violently tear open the land, and like the red pool of blood, the land is filled with a scattered soil which is red in colour.

As the narrator mentioned in the novel, the coming of roads changes everything. The pristine land and forest has been exchanged for what is considered as modern development. Concrete buildings, electricity, telephone, bazaar, school etc. came to the village, and in exchange, trees has been cut down and forests have been cleared for government and public use. Amid this chaos, the narrator weakly protests against the new development and the exploitation of land by saying:

“Land was being stolen. Forest were being cut and logs floated away down the river. New fences marked old territory and it seemed a curtain had fallen over the old villages. What was once sacred, the old sense of joy, was being lost” (Dai 163)

The statement of the narrator expresses how nature has been destroyed under the supervision of men. By neglecting the intrinsic value of nature, men destroyed natural resources out of greed. The subjugation of land, forest and nature as a whole is due to men’s negligence of the ecological value of nature, as well as the desire of men to subjugate and control the world that surrounds him.

Similar to nature, women characters in the novel are the victims of male subjugation. Living in a male oriented society, women have to function in conformity to the patriarchal system. The tribeswomen are daughters of solitude and miracles. Through their marriage, bonds between two clans are made. Marriage, on the other hand is used to measure the worth of women. It becomes a symbol of their social dignity and it elevates them to a position of a normal woman. In the chapter 'The Words of Women', Arsi's statement reveals the true status of women, "A woman's marriage beads and obligations she fulfils as wife and mothers are the measure of her worth" (Dai 76). Once she is married, she is imprisoned by the orders and duties imposed upon her by the male hegemony. As a mother and wife she fulfils her duty, but as a woman her life ends with marriage. Thus, marriage becomes a dominating force which degrades and control the life of women.

The character of Pinyar, the widow, mirrors the realistic life of women under male domination. The exploitation she endured can be paralleled with the constant domination endured by nature from men. When the road was built, the forest and the land of Pigo are exploited by the outsiders, likewise Pinyar is exploited by Orka, who belonged to other village. Both Pinyar and nature were left by the outsiders in helpless form. When Pinyar announced that she is pregnant with Orka's child, her family called to solemnize the marriage. But within the year of the child's birth, Orka cold heartedly abandoned her and took the child with him. Pinyar's story vividly discloses the countless domination, exploitation and shame imposed upon women by men. Just like nature which has been continually harmed by men, being subjects of domination women bear the pain and hardship showered upon her by man and his patriarchal institution.

Through its narration of the different stories which revolves around the Adi tribe, *The Legends of Pensam* channels the constructed connection between women and nature that has been constructed by patriarchy as a means of oppression. It reveals how the connection between the forms of oppression is maintained by patriarchy in every society at the level of dualistic assumptions. At the same time, it also stresses the culturally ingrained discrimination against women and nature which identifies them as sole provider and nurturer. By focusing on the mutual domination shared by women and nature, it preaches the importance of liberation which will free women and all species from subjugation and domination. Thus, *The Legends of Pensam* with all its mythic, animistic and realistic contents, not only tells the story of the Adi tribe but it also offers a significant contribution to the field of ecofeminism.

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