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**The Cultural in-Between: A Metamodern Reading of Tribal Folklores in Mamang Dai's
*The Legends of Pensam***

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Abstract

Ihab Hassan's march "towards an aesthetic of truth", and *Vermeulen and Akker's* "oscillation between modern naiveté and postmodern skepticism" can be new perspectives on conditions and values of north-eastern culture. Mamang Dai in *The Legends of Pensam* (2006), a novel of folkloric legends, ascertains these new conditions of tribal culture and rediscovers assimilation and negotiation across the cultural divide in oral stories of the Adi community. The study proposes to examine the metamodern aspects identified in the Adi culture and underlines their new cultural spirit of negotiating change with faith, wisdom and memories. In the light of this, the objective of this research paper is to establish the argument that the North-Eastern cultural narratives depicted in modern and postmodern tribal literature need to be unburdened from the themes of separatism and insurgencies with an aim to underline metamodern coherence and authenticity in these socio-literary narratives particularly *The Legends of Pensam*.

Keywords: Metamodernism, New Sincerity, Oscillation, Post-Irony.

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Introduction: Contextualizing Metamodernism in the Adi Folklores and Cultural Praxis:

Folklores tell stories which are culturally specific and not only mirror tribal culture but also shape it. Culture, understood in its fundamental elements, has its genesis in oral literature and, ‘folklore as a mirror of culture frequently reveals the areas of special concerns’ (Dundes 55). Folklores, legends and myths delineating tribal culture have been the essentials components of storytelling in the North-East. The cultural exclusivity of tribal societies is evident from their unique folklores based on specific values, beliefs and faiths. “The contents of the local myths and sacred lore are symptoms of the depth of the philosophy of their life” (Dabi 12) and the Adi tribe like all other tribes of north-east India maintains a rich socio-cultural heritage in the form of songs, dances, festivals, foods and their indomitable efforts to preserve their cultural identity through their oral legends.

The negotiation between tradition and modernity has been the core concern or spirit of northeast culture since the beginning of cultural transformation with the advent of modernity in this part of India. The rampant interaction with the outer world has changed the tribal culture. This cultural interaction started on a positive note with the modern agenda of development and liaison with tribal world but reduced into ethnic conflict leading to postmodern cultural fragmentation. In the last decades of the twentieth century postmodern sensibilities held sway over north eastern literature as it dealt predominantly with the conflict-ridden fragmented culture of the tribal world. “Much of the literary discourse of the North-East revolves around the political issues of insurgency, marginalization and alienation, thus creating a kind of a stereotype around the genre and making the term ‘Literatures from the North-East’ almost synonymous with ‘insurgency literature’”(Basumatary124).

Contrary to the predominance of postmodern obsession with plurality and incoherence in the north-east literature on tribal culture, the metamodern spirit seems to be the new feature of tribal literature underlining cultural oscillation between modern enlightenment and postmodern irony. Mamang Dai’s revelation that, “we have to accept this fact and understand

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that culture cannot grow if it's frozen or mummified. What we need to do is understand this process and find ways of how we can retain a sense of continuity" (qtd. in Lepcha) highlights this new cultural sense by showing a world of folkloric wisdom of Adi people in the age of cultural fragmentation. She refashions Adi myths, legends, and beliefs into culture signifying practices of tribal world where modernity has changed Adi society but at the same time a tribal difference is also made in the process of modernization.

The thrust then at that point in time still remains valid and unchanged today which is, that emerging literatures from the Northeast region, having undergone historical and political trauma of untold suffering and marginalization, registers various voices that need to be heard and understood in the context of India's multicultural mosaic. They usher in a different brand of literary repertoire in ways that depict their various communities, their unique linguistics registers, and the worldview that they project in an endeavour to preserve their cultural and ethnic identities. This is not to be mistaken simply as blind nostalgia for a way of life long lost, but must be received as voices of individual authors from societies caught in the cross current of their political and historical inheritances, personal tragedies and cultural ambivalence, voices that are involved in developing and contributing to a much larger literary consciousness that needs to be recognized and interrogated. (Zama, Xi-Xii).

Metamodernism is indisputably the most explicit manifesto among other contemporary theoretical or philosophical understandings of the change in tribal societies for its emphases on the cultural continuity in current northeastern tribal zeitgeist. It has replaced skepticism with faith and seeks totality in fragmentation. Drawing the power from postmodern uncertainty, metamodern thinkers assert that, "postmodern doubt can be made to doubt itself, and when cleansed of its negative dogmatism and lingering longing for lost certainties it can show us the way toward humble, emancipator knowledge" (Storm 4). The stories in *The Legends of Pensam*, embedded in metamodernity, necessitate the role of folkloric wisdom in the times of eroding tribal culture and oscillate between modern hope and postmodern melancholy. Thus shows Adis' cultural spirit as, "inspired by a modern naiveté," in making

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their society a modern society and also, “informed by postmodern skepticism,” in challenging anything that doesn’t belong to their tribal world to build a new culture which is like, “the metamodern discourse consciously commits itself to an impossible possibility” (Vermeulen & Akker 60).

The meaning of the word ‘pensam’ that is ‘in-between’ symbolizes a new phase of chequered history of Adi community in particular and tribal world in general. It highlights a less confrontational and more negotiable socio-cultural aspects of Adi tribe. Mamang Dai’s words, “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” (*The Legends of Pensam* VII) evoke Ihab Hassan’s claims that cultural conflicts can be reanalyzed with the sense of trust and, “if truth is dead, then everything is permitted” (*Beyond Postmodernism* 307). This same perspective becomes the metamodern thematic concern of the novel looking at the cultural change in the Adi society as a constructive force necessitating the need to, “treat conflict as a form of life, particularly since we all know that it is precisely during the period of our lives when we are exposed to a conflict that really challenges us, and that we finally are able to master, that we feel most alive,” (Galtung 501). Further, Hoxo, the protagonist, corroborates this faith by saying that, “everything, good or bad, was inevitable. We need courage and faith in the face of change. That is all we can do” (*The Legends of Pensam* 43).

Legends Underlining Oscillation in Adi Culture:

The myths on the origin of the Adi tribe, the history of the clan, their daily expeditions to nature and most importantly their struggle with development are, “flexible cultural description based on ... a perceived sense of belongingness to all of the categories signified by ideas like homeland, cultural heritage and belief system. The multi-ethnic cannot be always understood in terms of dominant and the peripheral, but also in the sense of a continuous negotiation between alternate centres of cultures” (Sarma 41). The cultural miasma of being exploited or unheard in north eastern society is now turning into an

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atmosphere of assimilation and this, “mutuality can be seen in the adaptation from below by numerically smaller communities, attempting to understand and work with the transformations across this region. Accommodating to change and recognizing opportunity, individuals and collectives in identified minority communities are seen to renegotiate their position in mainstream society” (Sarkar 18). These legends vouch for aesthetic negotiation rather than the philosophical conflict between modern and postmodern cultural belief and:

oscillate between a modern enthusiasm and a postmodern irony, between hope and melancholy, between naiveté and knowingness, empathy and apathy, unity and plurality, totality and fragmentation, purity and ambiguity” (Vermeulen & Akker 61).

The mysterious birth of Hoxo who was found in the forest by Lutor, chief of the Ida clan of Adis symbolizes the tribal belief of their miraculous origin. The legend of a water serpent Biribik whose mere sight causes death and how a hunter Kalen and a little boy Kepi were cursed by the sight of this serpent ascertains the longevity of tribal myths preserved through folklore because, “everyone present knew the story of Biribik, the water serpent. No one, for generations now, remembered the name of the first person who had seen it, but the event was fixed in their collective memory” (*The Legends of Pensam* 9). Kalen was killed by his fellow hunter during a hunting expedition and Kepi in a mysterious incident grew immovable which these people believe was inevitable. These legends highlight the coherence in the belief that, “the serpent ritual had to be performed” (*The Legends of Pensam* 23) to avoid wrath of the serpent and at the same time an acceptance of the inevitability of Biribik’s presence as a metaphor of curse in tribal life. Similarly the legends of Lekon and Kamur, the former, who was also killed in a hunting expedition and the latter, who killed his wife and daughter under the influence of a spirit underline the collective misfortune of the Adi tribe. Adi’s cultural practice of keeping faith in the face of adversity comes to surface in the narrator’s words that, ‘their days were passing ... life moved on quite normally; they hid their pain, while the seasons turned’ (*The Legends of Pensam* 25). These mythical legends reconstruct the

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transcendental value of tribal culture which involves a dynamic between opposing sensibilities placed between cultural modernity and traditional tribal knowledge.

The legend of tribal men climbing the highest peak to collect aconitum for poisonous arrows narrates the ritualistic terrifying journey. This legend highlights the ceremonious acceptance of hardships in tribal culture because, “survival, as always, was a matter of courage and quick action” (*The Legends of Pensam* 59). In another folklore a miraculous vessel called Danki believed to be the source of fortune for the Lotang family and its passing over from one generation to next generation highlights the value of clan in tribal culture as, “all history is a history of connections” (61). Both these stories underline the importance of rituals in tribal culture and when the tribal men in search of aconitum return dazed and pale or the miraculous vessel becomes the source of misfortune to the Lotang family, in both cases, the rituals were performed to, “ward off the danger that had followed the men to their houses” (60), and, “after the disappearance of the Danki the Migu clan decided to perform an elaborate family ritual” (65). These folklores highlight the inherent resilience, faith and wisdom in Adi culture as a shaman explains that, “we are not here without a purpose. Our purpose is to fulfil our destiny. All life is light and shadow; we live and we die, and the path of destiny is the quest for faith” (57).

This telltale account of everyday Adi life oscillating between existential and spiritual realms in the form of legends and folklores becomes the intrinsic cultural value of Adi people even in current times when the challenge has come in the form of change in their traditional culture in the wake of modernization. These legends as symbol of unyielding wisdom and resilience of tribal people accelerating the shift from an archetype to a contemporary society. The fascinating profile of ethnic diversity shown in these legends holds sway over tribal sensibilities occupied in cultural change and necessitates the value of cultural transformation with assimilation and negotiation. Mamang Dai lends contemporaneity to the traditional Adi folklores with the assertion that the cultural confrontation is negotiable with the continuity of inherent tribal wisdom and faith even in modern times.

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The proposal by the narrator's friend Mona to make a documentary on Duyang village and its people brings out the clearest manifestation of the cultural oscillation of tribal people in this novel. Mona considered this proposal as a golden chance for the tribal not only to expand their folkloric culture but also to preserve it. However villagers neither turn down nor invest blind trust in this proposal and interestingly organized the live performance of dance and folkloric songs of their culture. This performance was, "a mingling of old-style presentations and new, modern talent" (*The Legends of Pensam* 184) highlighting the cultural in between of Adi tribe who in the time of technology remain faithful to their ritualistic dance performances preserving their history and culture without any fear of losing it or any desire to preserve it through modern technology. This tribal culture of faith, struggle, resistance and acceptance in the narrator's words, resonates to metamodern cultural oscillation between poles of modernity and postmodernity with the tendency to remain authentic as the narrator observes, "I felt certain that no matter what happened to it, if I were granted a visit after an absence of a hundred years, I would recognize it again even if no record of it had survived" (*The Legends of Pensam* 189). These legends are the examples of, "unique processes of adaptation, devolution, secondary primitivization, withdrawal, oscillation, and regional universalization" (Saraswati 15) initiating the process of cultural negotiation during a phase of cultural contests.

These legends, furthermore, transcend what they document because the Adi men and women are not ensnared by the duality of their culture in the times when modernization has put challenges to their cultural identity. In fact by remaining glued to the inherent wisdom and faith in their myths and folklores full of cultural confrontation with the outer world they seem to be ready to tread a path of metamodern oscillation between tribal ingenuity and modern development. Rakut reveals this cultural coherence appropriately when he avers that, "the most beautiful thing is that we are all bunched up together on oceans and cities, and deserts and valleys, far apart from each other in so many ways, but we have words, and the right words open our minds and help us to recognize each other" (191), and the Adi legends are

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full of these right and wise words on metamodern cultural coherence preferring an oscillation between many dimensions of a tribal culture rather to break down in socio-cultural fragmentations.

Post-irony and New-Sincerity as New Lexicon of Tribal Culture:

The Legends of Pensam is unique in its metamodern approach towards ethnic conflict resulting from the struggle between modernity and indigenous culture. The Adi tribe confronted change since British era when, “migluns [Britishers] were digging a tunnel right across the world. They wanted help in this work and a labour corps was being recruited from the various hill tribes” (38) and with this:

The spirits of our ancestors who dwelt in these high and secret places fell with the trees. And everything had changed since then. The canopy of shelter and tradition had fallen. The wind and the sun burned our faces. We wanted more. Suddenly we knew more. There was more beyond our poor huts and cracked hearths where we once eased our dreams with murmured words and a good draft of home brew (*The Legends of Pensam* 42-43).

Even in recent times, as depicted in the novel, road becomes the metaphor for development embedded with fragmentation. Pigo village, once a magical place, “had moved to its own quiet rhythm for centuries, with old certainties and beliefs, but the road was changing all that” (*The Legends of Pensam* 148). The irony of the situation is that young men of the village see the road construction as invasion on their culture unlike as generally assumed harbinger of change and development in normal cultural settings. “The roads in the capital are worse than the one they are building here. If they cannot tidy up there what guarantee do we have they will give us anything good here” (156). Interestingly, the elders in this village transpire this cynicism into a deep commitment and optimism against the assumption that the old generation is more rigid to change and development. An old man says about the village “hadn’t it survived for so long? Wouldn’t it survive these winds of change as well? Words can solve riddles and transform a life. Our village is very old and patient, don’t worry” (158).

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The oscillation between boon and bane of development in the hills in spite of the turbulence experience with socio-economic change highlights the metamodern cultural sensibilities in Adi tribe. Self-referencing irony and self-critical belief of old people highlight the post-ironical metamodern elements in tribal culture seeking assimilation in confrontation while distancing from being pro-development or anti-development. These legends highlighting change in Adi culture after the construction of road in the hills heighten the effect of irony emanating from modern vs. traditional discourse in tribal living and unlike the expected outcome of fragmentation and separatism in these societies, the words of kao, “today, tomorrow, what does it matter? Time moves on and to survive in one piece all one needs is the ferocity of a lion or the heart of an angel,” (*The Legends of Pensam* 130) not merely, “advocate a simple return to sincerity ... but rather wish to preserve postmodernism’s critical insights,” that both culture and development are crucial, “while overcoming its disturbing dimensions,” (Konstantinou 89) that culture and development are unmatched.

The cultural view of the tribal society in the novel is that the traditional myths, legends and stories can help in developing a worldview of the contemporary cultural contrition in the Adi tribe. Rakut, with the help of a legend, gives a broader historical context of struggle between tribal and Britishers as, “the early decades of the 20th century were times of great upheaval, when our remote hills were opened up to the world,”(*The Legends of Pensam* 49). The ensuing violence between the Britishers and the Adis causes killings of many tribal people and this was how the struggle to connect with tribal on the part of Britishers and efforts to remain culturally Indigenus on the part of the Adis started. This socio-cultural struggle, after a long history of violence and suppression, tilts towards a new dimension of negotiation and assimilation in this novel and Rakut’s understanding of this strife in present times is an undisputed metamodern refrain of cultural continuity amidst socio-economic change in the Adi world. In shaman’s words:

The killing happened here, but the killers were from another village. But they were of our tribe. Yes, perhaps the white man was a good man; perhaps he would have been welcome in

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the village. But destiny was written long before he came to these hills, just as the destiny was written for the man who struck the first blow (*The Legends of Pensam* 54).

The generation gap reflected in a tribal society where the changes and atrocities brought in the form of a road are seen as, in Jameson's words, a mere "cultural dominant" and metamodern cultural coherence is envisioned while not ignoring the cultural fragmentation erupted due to the geo-social modernization in Adi community. It underlines the spirit of new-sincerity in tribal culture which asserts that, "why should we be afraid of change? Change is a wonderful thing! It is a simple matter of rearrangement, a moment of great possibilities! Why should we be so afraid?" (*The Legends of Pensam* 191) and their folkloric wisdom helps them to confront cultural change with the belief that, "the most beautiful thing is that we are all bunched up together on oceans and cities, and deserts and valleys, far apart from each other in so many ways, but we have words, and the right words open our minds and hearts and help us to recognize one another" (*The Legends of pensam* 191). This metamodern moment in Adi culture oscillates between modern and postmodern sensibilities and offers an alternative cultural condition of ironical detachment of Adi people to changing patterns of their society while also being earnest to this change on the line of new-sincerity.

Conclusion:

Mamang Dai's novel *The Legends of Pensam* underlines cultural change in the Adi tribe. Contrary to popular notions and prevalent narratives writing north east culture as separatist or isolated, a new dimension of assimilative culture is explored in Adi folklores and their everyday life. A new cultural atmosphere of negotiation in tribal world has turned postmodern concerns about ethical identity of the Adi community into a matter of metamodern cultural rearrangement and coherence.

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