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Tradition, Identity, and Oral History: Representation of the Adi Tribe in Mamang Dai's *The Legends of Pensam*

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Abstract: Indigenous cultures have a strong connection to the natural world; the way of life of those who live in these communities is strongly entwined with the beauty of the surrounding environment. Mamang Dai have brought Adi tribe, an indigenous tribe of Northeast India in the lime light which allows one to explore and dive into a culture very different from the other world. She is a well-known Indian journalist, novelist, and poet from the Northeast. She received the Sahitya Akademi Award in 2017 for her book *The Black Hill* (2014). Dai's novels deal with the importance and necessity of balancing harmony among nature, humans and spirit, whose misbalance and disregard bring calamities and unfortunate, incomprehensible incidents in life. This article attempts to analyse her work *The Legends of Pensam* (2004), the Adi tribe's way of living, culture, customs, rituals, cuisine, and mythology. It aims to observe the indigenous sensibility of the Adi community and how they live in their remote and less exposed habitats far away in contrast to the super civilized world.

Key word: Tribal literature, Oral tradition, Cultural Identity, Environment.

Introduction

The term "Indigenous" refers to a group of people whose dietary patterns, customs, ceremonies, and other practices are linked to the original occupants of a particular area. Traditionally speaking, indigenous peoples have been linked to a particular land that they rely on, yet they can also live sedentary lives in one area, travel widely on foot, or be resettled, and there are approximately more than five thousand Indigenous countries in the world. The text *The Legends of Pensam* depicts the Adi tribal community who are the groups of indigenous people of the Indian state of Arunachal Pradesh. In her book, using the fictional characters she investigates the primitive customs and beliefs of her people to recount the many legends that influence the lives of Adis. Her documentation of these tribal lores ensures that they are preserved and not lost and forgotten in the sweep of modernization.

The name Adi means 'hill man' and this tribe is divided into two main divisions- the Bogum and Onai. The most noteworthy and fascinating aspect of the tribe is their ability to survive on their own. They hunt, grow crops, and cultivate their rice despite the intense heat and humidity of the Siang Valley. On the festivals and celebrations like customary gatherings, they feed upon their favourite foods like rodents, such as rats and squirrels. It is very interesting



to find that the tribe do not have one particular God but follows animism which a religion based on spirits, which holds that all natural objects exist. And for performing various rituals the villages have a resident 'shaman,' who is highly significant individual with access to both good and evil spirits. They also have a large number of spirit gods and goddesses. In "The Legends of Pensam", the narrator skilfully discusses the tribal customs and culture through a series of interwoven anecdotes, and legends. The narrator, together with her friends, travels to regions where the locals, via their stories, share the knowledge of the cultural richness, traditions, and age-old practices and this is masterfully weaved by the characters along with the narrator, who made this a wonderful piece of literature.

Analysis

The prologue illustrates imagery with stark differences, the way "the helicopter passes through the clouds," the modern and the previous time devoid of any scientific inventions are brought together. On one hand 'helicopter' signifies the scientific development of the present day, a flying vehicle, which carries six passengers, takes them to a place far removed from the hectic city life. On the other hand, the narrator beautifully landscaped the scenery, the rivers, as serene and sparkling like lost fragments of a magnificent ocean. Essentially, this is a juxtaposition of the current state of affairs, with the majority of things being materialist and the others being solely related to nature, its objects, its transformation, and its bountiful gift of abundance.

The book begins with stories based on the first generation of villagers. The first part talks of the stories from the primitive age which is bundled up with myths and the age-old practices which were being followed by the people for everything. Nature and its belongings were all in all and they believed that nature was their only saviour. The second part begins constructing the travel road which allows others to enter into the fascinating world which was otherwise hidden from the other world. Two persons Jules and Mona arrive from the outside world to know more about the village folks. They hear a few stories of the village and its people, participate in village activities and a feast, and then depart. The third part covers the second generation of people, now adults. They mingle with people from other worlds and as it happens the cultures are assimilated and a hybrid culture is formed. Much of the native traditions are given up and new traditions are being followed. But the link with the traditional past is not broken even if modernization sets in. The fourth part again brings up an opportunity for the natives to open up before the whole world, display their age-old traditions and be proud of it in the present modern worldview.

To dive deep into the novel, it is depicted how for the Adi tribe hunting has always been a significant aspect of their way of life. Typically, the women in the villages would gather food, and the men would go hunting in the pitch-black forest, looking for prey. In the opening chapter we find "Hoxo's father was killed in a hunting accident" (10), which illustrates how they have to put their lives in danger to support their families, there always is lurking danger in their ways in the woods but they vow to always take up challenges and move ahead.

They also adhere to their customs and have their legal system. For instance, when Hoxo's father was assassinated by a clansmate, he was expected to get the death penalty for murder; but, because the friend made a mistake, he was exiled for a month in the jungle and subjected to cruel treatment.

As we can observe every tribe has its own set of religious customs and beliefs, and these revolve around the worship of God and the spirits. Adi tribe reveals that they were practitioners of animism. The faith and customs of the native Adi tribes are predicated on the concept of nature worship. They hold that the wicked spirits who prey on humans are the souls of those



who have died tragically and their spirits are lost in the atmosphere, unable to find refuge in either heaven or hell. They occasionally attack people maliciously to disrupt societal order.

For instance when the child of Togum suffered,

“The child did not move during all this time but he cried, ate, and slept with his small torso twisted stiff and unmoving. They carried him everywhere. Then someone said that they should think about performing a special ceremony, rarely performed these days, in case it was the spirit of a snake that had coiled around the body of their son.”

(21)

Rather than seeking medical attention or advanced treatment, Hoxo recommended performing the ‘serpent rite’ right then on the following evening, when they made peace with the spirits the infant was brought back. When these narratives are read by a modern human being who is well versed in the scientific world it feels like reading a fairy tale, but the tribal community believes in the same.

In another instance “Pinyar said, ‘My boy is being haunted by an evil spirit because we failed to observe certain rites in the past.’” (33) If we try to understand Kamur, Pinyar's son, from a modern standpoint, we can see that he may have been experiencing some psychological issues. However, Pinyar realised that something must be wrong with the rituals and that the evil spirits may have captured him and harmed him at this time. And therefore, priests were called to heal the youngster to help him cast out these bad spirits.

In the next instance, “When a house catches fire, the luckless owner is banished to the outskirts of the village.” This illustrates the connection between fate and natural events, as the person's fate may be determined by their misdeeds which is otherwise a natural phenomenon. He is consequently exiled from the village in order to ensure that any evil spirits or spells that may have descended upon him stay outside of the community and do no harm to others.

Apart from the spiritual beliefs, the nature is worshipped by the Adi tribe vividly for helping them for everything. There is an instance where-

“In dreams, my people say, they see the rain mother sitting on the treetops, laughing in the mist. Her silver ornaments clink as she rides the wind, brandishing her sword. Every time she twirls her skirt, the storm clouds edged with black rush up to cover her.”(36)

The Adi tribe views the rainy season as their "rain mother," whom they adore, just as we find in Greek and Hindu mythology about the relationship between the seasons and a god. On one hand, in modern context we understand seasons with studies relating to meteorology, study the change of seasons with knowledge of earth's rotation and revolution. Seasonal festivals are occasions to worship the elements of nature for peace, strength, and prosperity. It is their belief that humankind will suffer and worry if the gods and goddesses are not appropriately worshipped and placated.

One more interesting fact of the Adi tribe is about the ‘shaman’ also known as ‘miri’ is an important person who is said to enter a trance or have an intense religious experience and gain numerous talents. They are generally believed to possess the powers of healing the sick, communicating with the afterlife, and frequently escorting the spirits of the deceased to the afterlife. The shaman is summoned to keep the spirits at peace for the benefit of the village's residents in almost every situation in the book where something negative is happening.

“In the beginning, there was only Keyum. It was neither darkness nor light, nor had it any colour, shape, or movement... way beyond the reach of our senses. It is the place of ancient things from where no answer is received. Out of this place of great stillness, the first flicker of thought began to shine like a light in the soul of man... 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.”(56)

The Sun-Moon god Donyi-Polo, who is revered as the world's eye, is the focal point of Adi religion. They hold ceremonies to placate malevolent spirits to fend off evil, and they believe in the existence of spirits. All creation is credited to Keyum. They believe that each of us has a purpose for being on this planet, and that task must be fulfilled. The all-powerful one who grants us life is also directing us.

Conclusion

In conclusion, *The Legends of Pensam* functions not merely as a cultural narrative but as a critical intervention that challenges the marginalization of indigenous communities within dominant literary and socio-political discourses. By foregrounding the lived realities of the Adi tribe, Mamang Dai resists homogenized representations imposed by urban-centric and colonial frameworks, instead reclaiming indigenous voices, memory, and epistemologies. The text draws attention to the vast number of indigenous communities in India whose cultural histories remain obscured or inadequately represented in mainstream narratives. Within the broader context of globalization, the work interrogates the paradox of progress: while technological advancement and global connectivity promise development, they simultaneously threaten indigenous identities through cultural erosion, displacement, and ecological exploitation. Dai's narrative thus exposes the cost of uncritical modernization, particularly the alienation of communities from their ancestral roots and sustainable environmental practices. Consequently, *The Legends of Pensam* calls for a more ethical model of development—one that recognizes indigenous knowledge systems, preserves cultural diversity, and promotes ecological responsibility. In doing so, the text underscores the urgent need to reconcile development with cultural and environmental sustainability rather than allowing progress to operate at their expense.

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