

Ecologies of Memory and Identity: Reading Mamang Dai's *The Legends of Pensam*

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Abstract

Mamang Dai's *The Legends of Pensam* emerges as one of the most potent literary meditations on indigenous identity, memory, ecology and the interface between myth and lived reality in contemporary Indian literature. Set in Arunachal Pradesh, the novel intricately weaves together stories across generations, blending folklore and oral tradition with urgent modern concerns. This paper examines Dai's narrative strategies and thematic preoccupations—especially her explorations of cultural continuity, the in-betweenness of “pensam,” ecological consciousness and the politics of indigenous representation. Through the lens of postcolonial and ecocritical theory and with reference to comparable global indigenous texts, the paper illuminates how Dai's work both preserves and reinvents Adi cultural legacies for the contemporary world.

Keywords: Consciousness, demonstrating, characters navigate, Arunachal Pradesh, distinctive
Introduction

The Northeast of India remains, for many literary critics and readers, a terrain of liminality—a place at the edges of the nation's consciousness and literary canon. Yet from this “in-between” space arises Mamang Dai's *The Legends of Pensam* (2006), a novel that has rapidly assumed canonical status not only for its ethnographic richness but for its profound literary artistry. “Pensam,” denoting a “middle ground” in the Adi language, becomes Dai's central metaphor—a conceptual space between myth and modernity, nature and culture, memory and history. The narrative, as critics have noted, is a tapestry of interconnected tales that together chronicle the everyday magic, turbulence and transformation experienced by the Adi people.

This paper explores how Dai's novel imaginatively reconstructs indigenous memory and identity through ecological sensibility and mythopoeic narrative. Critical comparisons are drawn with other indigenous and postcolonial writers, such as Leslie Marmon Silko and Witi Ihimaera, demonstrating both the uniqueness and the global resonances of Dai's fictional project. The analysis foregrounds the intersectionality of tradition, environment and identity, revealing how Dai positions oral history and ecological consciousness as tools of survival and resistance.

The Narrative Structure: Stories Within Stories

Dai eschews linear narrative and instead crafts a novel composed of interlinked stories that together form the collective memory of Pensam village. At the heart of these stories is Hoxo, whose mythic origins and ambiguous fate refract the uncertainty and possibility central to the concept of “pensam.” Dai's choice of a fragmentary, even cyclical structure echoes not

only oral storytelling traditions but the lived rhythms of the Adi community, where time is experienced as layered and recursive. The narrative's embedded stories, recounting inexplicable events, ancestral legends and everyday heroism, resist the rationalist, linear temporality privileged by colonial and contemporary historiography.

This method aligns Dai's work with global indigenous storytelling forms; as Leslie Marmon Silko writes in *Ceremony*, "Stories are all we have, you see, all we have to fight off illness and death." The stories within *The Legends of Pensam* are more than entertainment: they are acts of cultural resilience and tools for identity formation.

Thematic Explorations

Identity and the In-Between

At its core, *The Legends of Pensam* interrogates the formation of identity within a world caught "in-between" old and new, myth and modernity. Dai presents her characters—Lutor, Hoxo, Nenem and others—negotiating a rapidly changing reality marked by outside interventions (from the British "migluns" to postcolonial development projects) and internal contestations. The boundary between the real and the mythical is porous; as Dai writes, "what was real could well be an illusion and that reality might only be the context that people gave to a moment". Identity, then, is fluid and adaptive, rooted in a tradition that is itself always in transition.

This theme resonates with the work of Witi Ihimaera, whose novels such as *The Whale Rider* similarly dramatize the negotiation between indigenous tradition and the demands of modernity for the Maori people. Just as Ihimaera's characters navigate inherited myths, so too do Dai's Adi figures inhabit, challenge and reinterpret their cultural inheritance for new times.

Memory, Oral Tradition and Cultural Survival

Memory is asserted as a living, generative force throughout *The Legends of Pensam*. The oral transmission of lore, rituals and histories forms what Pierre Nora has termed "lieux de mémoire"—sites of memory where history and myth merge. In Dai's work, this process is not merely nostalgic but strategic; it is through recalling and re-enacting stories and customs that the community persists against cultural erasure and the pressures of assimilation.

As in Toni Morrison's *Beloved*, where the re-collection of memory becomes essential for survival and self-making, so too in Dai's novel does memory constitute both identity and resistance. The iterative retelling of the Hoxo story and the varied accounts of origin myths serve to re-inscribe meaning onto a changing world, giving the Adi people agency in the face of external disruptions.

Ecology and Cultural Landscape

Dai's narrative renders the mountains, forests and rivers of Arunachal Pradesh as co-protagonists, integral to the lives and identities of the characters. The novel foregrounds a form of animism—an ecological awareness in which the natural and spiritual worlds are intertwined. Here, the human is not master but part of an ecological community; the boundaries between man, spirit and animal are permeable, reflecting the Adi ethos of ecological balance.

This affinity with land and non-human life echoes Linda Hogan's *Mean Spirit* and other forms of indigenous eco-writing. In both, the landscape is not a setting but a presence that

shapes, sustains and even outlives human history. Dai's rendering of the "pensam"—the in-between state—thus functions as a mode of ecological as well as existential understanding.

Myth and History: The Politics of Representation

Dai's interweaving of myth with mundane reality operates as a critique of received historical narratives, privileging indigenous ways of knowing over colonial or statist historiography. The British presence and later governmental interventions are depicted as sources of both change and unsettlement, but never as defining forces; it is the "legends of pensam," rather, that encode the values, anxieties and hopes of the people. In this sense, Dai participates in the project, articulated by postcolonial theorists like Homi Bhabha and Gayatri Spivak, of recovering subaltern voices and re-centering marginalized epistemologies.

Comparatively, this revisionist strategy finds resonance in N. Scott Momaday's *House Made of Dawn*, which reclaims Native American cultural forms and perspectives from the margins of American literature. Dai, similarly, refuses homogenizing national narratives, insisting on the specificity and dignity of local knowledge.

Comparative Perspectives

Dai's work, while deeply grounded in Arunachal Pradesh, resonates with themes and techniques central to indigenous writing worldwide. The focus on landscape, communal memory and the porousness of myth and reality situate *The Legends of Pensam* as a global text of indigenous modernity. Such similarities are not coincidental but stem from shared experiences of colonization, cultural resilience and adaptation across geographically dispersed communities.

Yet, as critics have noted, Dai's narrative is distinctive in its unyielding devotion to locality—the uniqueness of Adi cosmology and cultural symbolism resists reduction to mere universalism. Her use of the Adi language terms, ritual and cosmological motifs produces a text that is, in Spivak's terms, "intimate to the particular," even as it speaks to common postcolonial and ecological concerns.

Conclusion

Mamang Dai's *The Legends of Pensam* is a landmark work in contemporary Indian and indigenous literature, exemplifying how the novel can become a repository for endangered memory and an instrument for cultural and ecological survival. Through its innovative narrative form and deep ecological sensibility, the novel foregrounds the inextricable intertwining of myth, memory and identity. Dai invites both indigenous and global readers to inhabit the uncertain, fertile grounds of "pensam" where tradition is not static but dynamic—constantly negotiated, reinvented and lived.

The themes and structures elaborated in Dai's novel echo those of other indigenous writers worldwide, establishing *The Legends of Pensam* as part of a vital literary conversation on cultural self-representation, resistance and the ecological imagination. Through her storytelling, Dai not only preserves but transforms Adi cultural legacies, making them vivid and vital for the present and the future.

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