

***THE QUEST FOR ROOTS: A STUDY OF MAMANG DAI'S
THE LEGENDS OF PENSAM***

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The search for one's identity, for one's root has ever since become a major concern, as the world has become a global village marked by a rapid movement, displacement and resettlement of people---both within and outside the nation. The quest for one's root and identity comes to focus in the writings of the subaltern writers of North-East India like Mamang Dai. This paper is an endeavor to shed light on Mamang Dai's quest for her own root through a study of *The Legends of Pensam* (2006).

Mamang Dai's *The Legends of Pensam* (2006) is a perfect blend of myth, tribal faith, history and tradition and culture of the Adis---the natives of the Siang Valley. Sketching the history of killing of Noel Williamson by the native in 1911 and the Abor expedition of 1912 in the background, Mamang Dai weaves her fiction and at the same time traces her origin, discarding the representation of the history by the Raj and narrating a discourse from the Subaltern point of view.

The quest for roots in Mamang Dai's *The Legends of Pensam* (2006) is evident from the way in which, every single details of the Siang Valley finds description. The Prologue opens with the mention of a helicopter journey of the narrator back home. The metaphoric significance of this flight is the flight back home, to one's own land---the place of one's origin. The narrator describes the village as a very small place where every individual knew the other person as "very few strangers crossed our paths." (Dai, 2006:4). This also highlights the fact that a strong community feeling was practiced by the dwellers of Siang. Tracing one's root calls for travelling time to the past. Triggering her memory, she recreates the place of her birth as the "village heaved with life." (Dai, 2006:4). The narrator discloses her visualization of "names and faces rising up like obscure jewels, shining again in their singular paths and destinies." (Dai, 2006:4). *The Legends Of Pensam* (2006) is the collection of legends of these "jewels" in her native, told from the point of view of her own firsthand experience, rather than being a narration of the members of the hegemony, who hardly understood the essence of the Adis of the Siang Valley. What Mamang Dai attempted in *The Legends Of Pensam* (2006), is to narrate the legends of the land from the past and serve us with the hue of the culture, geography, faith and tradition of the land from the point of view of the native of the land, the practitioner of the faith. And in this course of narration, she walks into the corridors of time to find her origin, to re-establish her roots.

The Legends of Pensam (2006) is a wonderful journey reflecting the writer's quest for her own root, her own identity. An analysis of the subaltern criticism highlights that recreating the history; the past of one's land is the key source to dig out one's root. *The Legends of Pensam* (2006) is a collection of legends of 'in-betweenness'. Mamang Dai lets us know that the word 'Pensam' may be interpreted as "hidden spaces of the heart where a garden grows." (Dai, 2006) Under four titles, Mamang Dai narrates many tales of Pensam. As the Legends unfold, the 'in-between' hidden land actually gains a concrete shape of the Siang Valley--- the very native of the narrator. Mamang Dai declares in the Prologue that the Adi tribe---the inhabitants of the Siang Valley "are the subject of this book" (Dai, 2006). Under the titles of *a diary of the world*, *songs of the rhapsodist*, *daughters of the village*, and *a matter of time* Mamang Dai narrates a number of tales describing the tradition, festival, geography, history and the tribal faiths of the Adis. The quest for root is evident in the way she introduces us to the natives of Siang as they practiced "an animistic

faith that is woven around the natural world” (Dai, 2006). She narrates the story of Biribik the water serpent, which she declares is “fixed in their collective memory” (Dai, 2006:9), though for centuries no one remembers who was the first person to spot the serpent. This is a fine example of how the writer talks of the native tales and beliefs. When Hoxo's father lets people know that he had seen the Biribik, there was a common expectance that something ominous would encounter Hoxo's father, and while in a village-hunting expedition, Hoxo's father is accidentally killed by his clansman, there is a general acceptance that Hoxo's father actually had to meet his end as it was believed by the tribe that it was a foretelling of some ominous incidents to occur in the life of the person who happens to see a Biribik. It is interesting to note that the tales of the village is narrated with the aim to be the subject matter of *Diary of the World*---a glossy magazine whose proprietor is Mona, a lady of Arab-Greek extraction, an 'outsider', friend of the narrator. Homi Bhabha said in 'Other Question' that there is a fetish for the 'other', which results in a desire to explore the 'other'. This was the reason which led to a longing in Mona to know the stories of the Adi tribe. Through Mona, the narrator introduces the readers to Bodak and we get a clear picture of the tribe's hunting custom and the myth associated with it. In *pinyar, the widow*, the work culture of the Adis in a primitive style is described. They believed in “setting off from home very early to work all morning, weeding, cleaning and planting. They carry their food with them and when the sun is high overhead they shelter in small thatch shacks and eat their midday meal and stretch out by the fire, sipping black tea” (Dai, 2006 :27). Pinyar, the widow lets Mona know about the tale associated with mili-mili and hunting activity. She accepts her widowhood is the result of her ignoring the age old belief. A tradition ran in the tribe that si-ye cakes were “strictly forbidden before a hunt or a journey. It makes men hallucinate just like the miti-mili race.” (Dai, 2006:29). Pinyar failed to observe the rules, which resulted in the death of her man in the forest. What surprised the narrator and Mona was that in the guise of observing taboo, actually a judicial system existed in the Adi tribe, according to which, the man who accidently killed Pinyar's husband, was banished to the forest for a period of time.

The concept of 'Home' is associated with one's origin. When Pinyar tells her son Kamur, “Come, we will go home,” (Dai, 2006:32), she means to take her son to a place which was his. It is also evident that Kamur too longs to go back home. His madness and the act of murdering his son and daughter, somewhere stems due to his rootlessness, being separated from his mother, Pinyar, in his infancy and in later life being settled away in Pigo town. The fact that Kamur's fit was due to his feeling of acute rootlessness is evident from the fact that he never had a fit again, after his mother rushed to Kamur in his acute mental disturbance, and brought him back to his origins, he came back to his roots and retained his identity which he badly used to long for before his fit--- the longing to be with his mother in his native home.

In *travel of the road*, the old headman says about the British, “They think we are a village of horror.” (Dai, 2006: 55) The shaman, the native of the land, however, lets Mona and her husband, Jules, know that the picture was not so. The Adi people had their firm belief system, history and tradition, but the reaction of the reaction of a British soldier was “What world was this?” (Dai, 2006: 53) The beautiful example of faith of the people can be traced in *the legend of the silence of adela and kepi*. The narrator describes Mona and Jules as “powerful, successful couples by any estimate---he is a famous development scientist and she the proprietor of a glossy magazine.” (Dai, 2006: 17). Ironically, when their only daughter Adela was diagnosed with autism, neither Jules, the development scientist, nor Mona the proprietor of a magazine carrying 'unusual true life stories' could find any clue and console themselves. Despite being posted in New Delhi, enjoying the exposure to the most modern medical facilities, they failed to find any reason of or cure to their daughter's disease.

In *The Legends Of Pensam (2006)*, the narrative voice keeps changing but it is interesting to note that the power of narration lies with the natives only, who describe their own land in its native colour. The desire to reclaim one's root is clearly evident in *a homecoming*. The narrator whose origin was in the

Duyang village, had moved to big cities. She realizes after sometime that she had cut loose from her origin. She longs for her land and declares "I could not bear to give up the original image and I could not change myself." (Dai, 2006: 81) Mamang Dai employs the metaphor of 'mother' to talk of one's origin. The narrator says that she returned to her mother, "who hadn't been able to hold me back." (Dai, 2006: 81) And likewise the death of the narrator's mother is a metaphor of the changes in her native, from which she always tried to go far away and the gaze and words of her land was so potent that she "had shielded herself with words and books that she never understood nor read." (Dai, 2006:82). Despite taking refuge in foreign language and life style, the narrator fails to shed off her originality and ventures to search out her identity from the ancient native teachings. She triggers her memory to remember "stories of creation, of our village and our people," (Dai, 2006:87), which she had heard from her mother---her origin, but grows up to "expect happiness from far away from her." (Dai, 2006:87).

It is in the tale *rites of love* that the quest for root reaches its zenith in a very symbolic tone. The earthquake of 15th August 1950, not only changed the demography of Nenem's native, it also invited panic in her life. A river always finds association with the birth and continuity of a civilization, and "the river that Nenem had so loved was thrown off its course as a mountain collapsed and blocked its path." (Dai, 2006:126). This earthquake has beautifully been used as a symbol which brings in a tumult in the native life. The market place which used to thrive with life with the tribal food items and local daily accessories, where Nenem took her oranges, where she met her love David, was all covered with dead fish after the earthquake. The originality of the land was being lost and amidst the changes, with the roaring sound of the river, Nenem tried to retrace her familiar roots. She tried to imagine and identify the river's roar to the "sounds of aeroplanes at war that David had described to her." (Dai, 2004:126). Her death is symbolic of her failure to accept the demographic changes and also the failure to witness the change that her village shall be the circle headquarters----the influence of a government system which was not hers. Nenem was in love with her roots, was fond of her custom so much so that she let David go and choose to stay back.

The quest for root is evident not only as the narrator traverse time and recreates her past, through the stories and histories of her land, from the narrations of Hoxo, the shamans and rhapsodists, but also when she analyses the changes that over powered the lives of her tribesmen. Before the road connected the Duyang village to the outside world, they had a primitive life, a law of their land, a strong faith in their customs which brought in a sense of a community living where every individual lived for every other person, helped rebuild a house of clansman when devoured by fire, sang, danced made merry during festivals and marriages and also mourned together during the funerals of their own people. With the construction of the road, there was an easy influx of ideas of the outer world into this tribal society. In the yester years, the fathers of the tribe went hunting, farming and filled their granary. But with the changing time, the primitive way was under challenge, where the carefree life of the people was disturbed and insecurity clutched every heart, as for the very first time, burglars were in abundance. There came in a detachment from the roots. Previously their faiths and customs restricted them from going to hunt after consuming rice-spirit, which warded off any hazards due to hallucination. "The village had moved to its own quite rhythm for centuries with old certainties and beliefs, but the road was changing all that." (Dai, 2006:148). The community and judicial system that was characteristic of the tribe started to crumble. During the past, when a man was banished to the jungles to maintain the taboo for killing a fellow man during hunting, the decision was accepted by all without a question. But with the coming in of the modernity, the roads and electric poles, the native beauty and flavor was withering away, as, "for the first time in the village voices had been raised in dissent." (Dai, 2006:153). All these led to a situation where, young boys of the clan like Luda, wished to spit out their anger, against the new system, through violence. This violence which was sure to erupt in the Siang Valley is shown in *The Legends of Pensam* (2006) to have been prevented, as Mamang Dai treads to the root of her culture and finds "It is not in our tradition to

be violent.” (Dai, 2006:157).

It is to be noted that in *the road* the natives are aware of their being involved in the rootlessness, of being influenced by the outsiders and they say, “We have sown grain together and we have reaped harvests, and we have survived. Now stop sowing poison.” (Dai, 2006:154). Things were changing, and foreign culture crept in to disturb the well settled structure of the tribe, and at the same time the longing for the past, the uncorrupt origin is visible. Duan who was the elected representative, had to be at the capital on works, came immediately at the call of his people and declared that the reason behind his immediate response was, “This is my home. I was born here. These stones, this mountain, this dust, this earth, it is in my blood. All of you, all of us must work together to bring progress to our village, our beautiful village.” (Dai, 2006:154).

The quest for one's root is the desire to re-establish one's origin and reclaim one's identity. Mamang Dai's *The Legends Of Pensam* (2006) is a beautiful souvenir which travels time into the past to find out what the Adi tribe was---- their customs, faiths and festivals, a then journeys through the British period to the present to show how different changes at different times had hit the land, where Nenem is symbolic to those who failed to accept the changes, Sirsiri and Kasup are the examples who could frame themselves into the changing world, and “learn the secrets of modern life.” (Dai, 2006:170), and Meng X represents the group which feverishly recollect the old past, and who are in a constant search for the past through their songs. In this phase, when change is inevitable, Rakut declares, “Change is wonderful thing! Why should we be afraid of change? It is a simple matter of rearrangement, a moment of great possibilities! Why should we be so afraid?” (Dai, 2006:190). This is where the narrator also changes and rearranges her technique to record the legends of her land. She discards and the situation demands that she no more holds the picture of her clan to the world through *Diary of the World*. The quest for the root is very much evident as she realizes that the “clan root is 'oratory’”. (Dai, 2006:158), the rhapsodists were no more, and as film was a gift of the modernity, she rearranges herself to regenerate the pictures of her origin and to preserve her native by capturing them in celluloid tapes.

Memory plays an important role in the oral tradition. During the transition phase, the narrator realizes and consoles saying, “If only they remember, someday, they would bridge the gap.” (Dai, 2006:163) Hence, so that the root, the native originality is not wiped from the memory, she is inspired to continue her search for her past, record them as films and help supply the new changing generations with a background to bridge the gap and the vacuum between their origin and the borrowed present.

Mamang Dai's *The Legends of Pensam* (2006) is a beautiful documentation of the life and culture of the Adi tribe, being served to us through the direct narration of the people of the land--- recorded in the first half in the *Diary of the World*, and in the second half, recorded in films. The method of documentation has been different, but the aim of documentation was the same. The aim was the desire of Mona who represents the outside world, to unveil the land, and simultaneously, the quest in the narrator, a native, and her necessity to enlighten the darkness, recreate the memories of the ways of the Adi world.

The quest for identity has been a major concern of the post-colonial Indian English literature and subalternism has been the theoretical paradigm of self representation of one's own self, rather than being described by a foreign voice which fails to have proper comprehension of the 'other'. *The Legends of Pensam* (2006) is an expression of the Adi tribal culture, which was time and again influenced by foreign cultures, and the constant desire to retain one's identity, the quest for one's root and origin is reflected, which prevents the clan from crumbling into oblivion, as the old people of the clan hope and profess “flowers growing on barren rocks” (Dai, 2006:162), and desire to grow old “not walking in an unknown land.” (Dai, 2006:161).

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