



Exploring Folklore Elements in Mamang Dai's *The Legends of Pensam*

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Abstract: Mamang Dai is one of the most prolific fiction writers of North East India writing in English. She is a native of Arunachal Pradesh and belongs to a tribe called Adi. She is quite well-known among the world's literary figures with lots of awards and accolades in her kitty. For the purpose of this paper, Mamang Dai's *The Legends of Pensam* is taken up for study and analysis. This paper will attempt to find out how the writer has projected the socio-cultural aspects of her state and community through her novel. It will also investigate various folklore facets in her fictional work, especially in the usage of folktales, myths, legends, beliefs, rituals, and customs which have been embedded in Adi society through oral traditions long before any kind of written records were available.

Keywords: Folklore, socio-cultural aspects, folktales, beliefs, oral traditions.

Introduction

The whole North East Region is like a mini-India with over 220 ethnic groups. It would not be wrong to say that each state under this umbrella is a mini-India in itself where a mixture of different tribes and sub-tribes co-exists with their own distinct cultures, traditions, customs, rituals, religious beliefs, languages, food habits, etc. This region abounds in folklore or oral narratives which were handed down by word of mouth by their ancestors from generation to generation. The writers from these regions have the arduous task of keeping alive their age-old dying oral traditions. So, the writers like Mamang Dai, Easterine Kire, Temsula Ao, and Janice Patriat have penned down their oral narratives in the form of fiction, poetry, short stories, and prose writings.

Why Study Folklore and Literature?

In today's world of interdisciplinary study, entities of one field could have a better understanding if it is taken into account for viewpoints of other fields related to it. The perspectives could be wider and more meaningful if studied together. Literature mirrors culture and Folklore is part and partial of culture. In literature, folklore can be the inclusion of a collection of fictional stories about people and animals, songs, jokes, tales, cultural myths, and even quotes. It is a portrayal of culture, handed down verbally in any written or spoken form. The answer would be more precise in what Mary Ellen B. Lewis had to say, "Both folklore and literature are parts of culture, produced or created by cultural beings. Their study expands our knowledge of its makers and possessors--their creative processes and strategies, their material's function." (MEB. Lewis, 1978: 163)

Definitions of Folklore

What is folklore? It is the combination of two words "folk" and "lore". Folk usually refers to people and lore would probably mean their knowledge or stories. Folklore was first coined by English antiquarian William John Thoms in 1846. According to him, folklore denotes "the manners, customs, observances, superstitious, ballads, etc of olden times."

Theodor H. Gaster gives the definition that, "Folklore is that part of people's culture which is preserved, consciously or unconsciously, in beliefs and practices, customs and observances of general currency; in myths, legends and tales of common acceptance; and in arts and crafts which express the temper and genius of a group rather than of the individual. Because it is a repository of popular traditions and an integral element of popular "climate," folklore serves as a constant source and frame of reference for formal literature and art; but it is distinct therefrom in that it is essentially of the people, by the people, and for the people." (Leach, 1949:258)

Thus, folklore is the traditional practice of customary art, knowledge, and literature that are handed down from one generation to another in verbal form. It is the information transmitted and expressing the values and ideas that are shared by the particular group. To have a better understanding of the board division of Folklore, R.M. Dorson, an eminent folklorist is quoted below. He has divided folklore into four large groupings: -

1. Oral Literature: Includes myths, legends, folktales, ballads, proverbs, riddles, etc.
2. Material Culture: refers to techniques, skills, recipes, social architecture, and objects that surround people.

3. Social Folk Custom: includes manors, landmarks, households, churches, holidays, and rites of passage as birth, initiation, marriage, and death observed by community, family, and village.
4. Performing Folk Art: includes music, dance, drama, and songs performed before an audience.

Folklore Elements in Dai's *The Legends of Pensam*

The Legends of Pensam by Mamang Dai is an interesting record of the folklore and ethnic social life of the Adi tribe; one of the major tribes of Tani groups dominating the East Siang district of Arunachal Pradesh. The book is divided into four major sections and each section deals with episodic narratives and sections displays rich sources of Adi folklore in the form of tales, beliefs, unnatural happenings, spirits, rituals, shamans which are an integral part of Adi culture for that matter of all tribal societies. Mamang Dai paints the canvas of Adi culture and traditional society infused with her own personal experiences for the world to have a glimpse of these exceptional people and places even without ever visiting them. Readers are taken on a journey across villages right into the middle of unique traditions and customs from the ancient to the modern Adi community.

Threads of oral literature are weaved artistically by the novelist in the folktales of Biribik, Miti- Milli, and the origin myth. Folktales are stories usually narrated to impart life teaching or to warn people of impending inauspicious events. When Hoxo's father saw a water serpent with a horn, the tale of Biribik is narrated. "It had happened on a night of heavy rain when a fisherman was alone with his nets by the river. He heard a rushing sound as the waters parted and then suddenly, when he looked up at the tree he was sheltering under, he saw a serpent coiled up in the branches looking down at him with ancient eyes. What shocked him the most was the fact that the serpent had a head with horns. The fisherman ran for his life, all the way back to the village, but as everyone could have predicted he never recovered from the effects of that terrible vision. Within a year, he had died of a wasting illness" (Dai, 2006: 9) Perhaps, this tale started among the community to warn an individual not to go fishing alone when community fishing can be done and shared equally among the households.

Pinyar, a woman character, narrates the story of the miti-mili race in connection to a hunting accident where her husband Lekon was shot through the head in the forest by a man. "Once upon a time, there lived a supernatural being called a miti-mili. These small, quiet people were the first to make the mysterious *si-ye* which is the yeast used to ferment rice into beer. Before the miti-mili race disappeared, deranged by strange visions, they gave this sacred powder to mankind, and a strong belief grew that *si-ye* had special powers and that it was something to be handled with respect. Only women are allowed to handle it... However, they are strictly forbidden before a hunt or a journey..., It makes men hallucinate, just like the miti-mili race. But sometimes some households forget to observe the rules, and our men die in the forests." (Ibid 28-29) This incident and the narration expose how a superstitious belief can interplay with the psyche of an individual and instil guilt.

Origin myth, narrated by the shaman, informs the readers that the origin of Adi is Cosmo-centric. "In the beginning, there was only Keyum. Nothingness. It was neither darkness nor light, nor had it any colour, shape or movement. Keyum is the remote past, 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. It became a shimmering trail, took shape and expanded and became a Pathway. 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 its creatures came into being... From nothingness we have come to be born under the stars, and almighty Donyi-polo, the sun and the moon, whose light shines on all equally, is the invisible force that guides each one of us." (Ibid: 56-57) This belief displays the equality of all living and inanimate objects. Just as the lights of the sun and moon shine equally without discrimination, so too, all things on earth should respect each other's space, beliefs, and customs.

Social Folk Customs of the Adi tribes, like the rituals, superstitious beliefs, taboos, and supernatural elements pervade *The Legends of Pensam*. Like all indigenous cultures across the globe, Adis too, are believers of animism. They believe that all animate and inanimate objects have spirits that can influence human beings. Every mishap taking place in their area happens because of harmful spirits: - Hoxo's father died in a hunting expedition soon after he had seen the water serpent, Biribik. Kepi became ill because his father, Togum, had killed a python. People believed that the spirit of the python had coiled around the baby's body. That is why, after searching for famous shamans far and wide for a year, Hoxo had to perform the 'serpent ritual.' He said that "all night they had chanted and negotiated with the spirits, calling them to restore the sick child, but the spirits had moved away to a place beyond recall." (Ibid: 24)

The episode of Kamur, the son of Pinyar is one of the most appalling ones. He had murdered his own children. His mother believed that he had committed this ghastly act because he was haunted by an evil spirit, or "because we failed to observe certain rites in the past. It was a mistake on the part of our parents and our parents' parents. It was my mistake too." (Ibid: 33) Some people argued that "He is not to be blamed. It is in the blood ... Some blood lines are almost taboo to mention They see visions. They are visited by spirits, and like miti-mili they are seized by bouts of madness." (Ibid: 31-32) There is also mention of an aubergine (eggplant) plant that had grown into the size of a tree, under which Kamur was seen at odd hours, doing nothing in particular. No one recalled planting it, yet "it bore small poisonous looking flowers that grew into long, bloated fruit, menacing and shiny. It was a ghostly tree and no one dared to cut it down." (Ibid: 31) Some things in the traditional society are baffling yet for them it makes sense since they are guided by these beliefs to lead a righteous life.

Taboos observed by Adis are cited in the novel. When the house of Pinyar, the widow caught fire, she was banished to the outskirts of the village. She built herself a shack at the extreme edge of the forest to observe taboo, "during which no one could go and eat with her for fear of provoking tiger spirit that causes fires and tempting it to follow them home." (Ibid:28) Another taboo mentioned is not to make *si-ye* before a hunting trip for it brings misfortune as in the case of Pinyar's husband.

Readers get an insight into a material cultural object called *danki* -the traveling vessel. Why is this object significant? It is significant in the sense that it helped to connect two different clans. The story behind this object was that

the Lotang family of the Migu clan owned a fabulous vessel called *danki*, made of the strongest metal alloy and it was an object of pride and admiration. It had intricated designs, and for generations, it had been passed down from father to son. One day the eldest son found the vessel overturned in its usual place. From that day onwards, he always found the vessel always overturned with moist leaves and twigs. This strange behavior of the vessel spread far and wide; many people poured in to witness it. Weird enough, the vessel showed itself only to members of the clan. This was the period when the Migu clan prospered to new heights and “the *danki* came to be cherished as an auspicious gift from the gods. When the owners held up and tapped it, the vessel vibrated and tinkled like a bell and they came to associate this sound with their good fortune.” (Ibid:63) Some two hundred years ago, shortly after an earthquake, the vessel was found split into two halves. It lost all its luster however much they washed and scrubbed with soap and ash. It became dull, iron grey, and heavier. Soon after, the object vanished and the misfortune of the Migu clan started, they became devoid of sons. With the disappearance of *danki*, the clan decided on an elaborate family ritual. For the ritual, they felled the tallest tree (symbolizing strength) and brought a hive of wild ants (symbolizing fertility). Famous Miri from the mountains of the north was called for, and he was unavailable. Another shaman from a nearby village came to perform the ritual. Unlike his unattractive physique, when he began to chant, his voice was delicate and sweet. He lodged for three days in Lotang house communicating with the spirits and “he left the village with a bag full of stolen coins and a number of heavy necklaces of precious stones.” (Ibid:64) A maternal uncle of the Migu clan gave him a chase but lost him. Instead, he ended up killing two women and an old man. He fled from the scene and landed in the village of “Sirum in the Duyang group, the home of Rakut’s forefathers. where he got married and had a son. Because the people of Sirum had taken him in, given him one of their daughters and revered him as their son-in-law, the Migu clan and all the other clans of Sirum were now united for prosperity in the bond of kinship.” (Ibid:65) And this bond of kinship becomes convenient, “in the time of need, when a person falls ill or a fire starts suddenly, or when there is a murder or a fatal accident, all the remembered links of kinship are called up and word is sent to clan members to come to the aid of their brethren.” (Ibid:65) It is amazing to see how a simple object could be revered and help in cementing the relationship between two clans. But it worked wonders for traditional Adi society, for they could depend on each other in times of emergency.

Dai, dedicates a whole section to Rhapsodist, Shaman, or the Miri, a central figure in traditional society- a means to magico-religious folk medicine. They performed rituals to ward off evil spirits, dangers, and illness. They are a source of hope for the village folks. They treat the sick and the possessed in their own way by intermedating between the ‘sick human’ and ‘the spirits’ who cause the illness. So, for Kepi’s illness, a serpent ritual was performed. Besides, the shaman was called to perform an elaborate ritual to invoke the celestial aunt to bless the issueless couple. Soon after, Nenem, the river woman who depicts free souls is born. Readers acquire perfect knowledge about the customs and traditions of Adi folks, from invocations and songs sung and performed by the Shamans. They are the recorders and guardians of histories. Even the intrusion of some foreigners who were brutally massacred and guilty natives were punished is gathered from the *ponung* performed by the dancers led by Miri with his chants. “The shaman is a shadow man leaping up larger than life. He has sung of the beginning of the world; of the swords of five metals that ignited the bonfires of the villages. He has sung the story of his brother, the one who killed a man and became a martyr; the story of the hawk woman who defied a community to live in a house by the river. These are the stories, rhapsodies of time and destiny, that he must guard.” (Ibid:55) So, shamans are not only the intermediary between humans and spirits for the sick and the possessed but are the recorders of the Histories of a tribe too.

The belief that a dead person’s spirit can enter a living human body and cause harm finds a cinematographic description in the story of a young woman falling asleep on the riverbank and waking up only after sunset. Adis believes, “it is a grave error for a woman to linger by streams and rivers after sunset, for night is restless with strange dreams and lost spirits.” (Ibid:84) The next day, the woman complained of stomach ache. An old woman who understood what had happened began to prepare for the rites of exorcism. A shaman was called who began chanting, calling the spirits to speak and disclose what they wanted. He began the dialogue of exchange “we will slaughter chickens and prepare you delicious food. We will pour wine over the stones and scent the wind with blood and ginger. We will observe taboos and maintain our peace.” (Ibid:85) The narrator’s mother knew about these things. She advises that at such times one should raise hell, people should gather and make loud noises otherwise one’s senses would be stolen. The magic quality of the shaman was revealed in his singing and entering the spirit world which was witnessed by the crowds gathered around and through him, they heard the cry of a young woman. “I drowned in the green pool. My unborn baby died with me. I died there last summer. Oh help me! I want to live! I want my life back! I want to live!” (Ibid:85)

For an outsider, the above-mentioned folktales, beliefs, rituals, and customs might seem alien and illogical but for Adis these define them. It helps them keep intact their identity and culture. The novelist very skilfully merges these folklore elements in her novella to show the uniqueness of her tribe. These elements enhance her fiction; readers are susceptible to being awestruck by the richness of the oral tradition of the Adi tribe of Arunachal Pradesh.

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