



The Individual and The Tribe: Myths and Conflict in Temsula Ao's *The Potmaker* and Mamang Dai's *Pinyar The Widow*

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Abstract : When Pinyar becomes a widow, she does not blame the killer of her husband. Mamang Dai, in her short story "Pinyar The Widow" works her way into the world of myths and superstitions through the life of Pinyar, whose unshakable faith in her tribal beliefs keeps her sane despite the very many tragedies that happen in her life. In Temsula Ao's short story "The Potmaker" we find Arnela, the mother who does not want her daughter to learn their tribe's inherent work of pot making, but wants her to be trained in weaving. But the community is offended with her decision. However the daughter Sentila will only study pot making. As the story unfurls, the persistent beliefs of the community is brought forward, especially when Onula tells Sentila that she must learn pot making from her mother alone and not any other woman. Pinyar and Arnela are stubborn in their own ways. The women in both the stories are strikingly different, and they voice themselves in heard and unheard ways to guard their decisions. The community protects the individuals, but at the same time the community protects its own interests too.

IndexTerms - Indigenous, Individual, Tribe, Conflict

Literature from the northeast India is a melting pot of culture, tradition, and beliefs. It is mostly characterized by a sense of nostalgia for a lost home, and is deeply marked by the unique culture and values of the community. The tribe has its own set of rules and everyone is expected to abide by it. And regarding the faith, the superstitions and myths associated with events and rituals are innumerable so much that they form the very fabric of the literature indigenous to the place.

Temsula Ao and Mamang Dai, two influential women writers from northeast India reiterates the voices of their storytelling ancestors in their works. Temsula Ao was a poet, fiction writer and an ethnographer from Assam, who also served as the director of the North East Zone Cultural Centre for a period. She was awarded the Sahitya Akademi Award in 2013 for her book *Laburnum for my Head*. Mamang Dai is a poet and novelist from Arunachal Pradesh. She was selected for the Indian Administrative Service in 1979, and was the first woman to be selected for the post from her state, but she left the post to

pursue her career in journalism. She received the Sahitya Akademi award for her novel *The Black Hill* in 2017.

Temsula Ao's short story *The Potmaker* is taken from the anthology *These Hills Called Home*. It is about the power of tradition and how it can change one's life. The tribal traditions and customs influence the formative years of the individual. The story is set in a Naga tribal community that holds the interests of the community above that of the individual. The story is about a mother and daughter who are part of a community that makes the best pots, and they are expected to pass down the art to the generations. Arnela, the mother is reluctant to teach her daughter the art of pot making. She feels that her daughter Sentila be taught weaving because Arnela feels it is more sophisticated and that it is what is suitable for a woman. Pot making being a tedious task where one needs to fetch the right kind of clay, soak them overnight, shape them skillfully on a wheel, sun dried and later baked, she finds it backbreaking. She does not want her daughter to go through the ordeals she, her mother and the ancestors had to go through. Therefore despite being the best pot maker of her village, she refuses to teach Sentila to make pots. What the mother does here is that she goes against the rules of their village, and she is not scared in doing so. But soon things take a turn when Sentila secretly visits the workplace of other women just to watch them make pots. The daughter wants to learn pot making despite her mother's disapproval.

In Mamang Dai's *Pinyar The Widow*, the world is abound in myths and superstitions. The story is taken from Dai's first novel *The Legends of Pensam*. It is a series of interconnected tales which seeks to assert the rich oral tradition of the Adi tribe inhabiting the Siang valley of Arunachal Pradesh. *Pinyar the Widow* is an attempt from the writer to resurrect the distinctive culture of the Adi community. Pinyar says that her destiny is cursed. A widow now, she does not blame the man who killed her husband. Along with the villagers, she believes that it was the Tiger spirit that caused fire in her home. Even when her son commits murder, she believes he must have been under a spell. Thus, Pinyar never goes against her community or the beliefs. The only time she did not listen to her clan was when she fell in love with Orka and bore a son out of wedlock. Orka leaves for his village with his son Kamur and said he would return but he did not. She later marries Lekhon and obeys her family in nurturing this relationship. But he gets killed in a hunting accident later. Pinyar is a cosmos of her community.

The clash between individual and the community has been a much-discussed theme in literature of all the times. The community seeks to restore peace and protect the individual at all the times, but it is not done without causing deformative harm in any one of the directions. The individual does not have another option, and he is not expected to deviate. In *The Potmaker*, Arnela is absolutely determined not to teach her daughter. But the mother does not seem to have a right over her daughter in this respect. When the villagers get to know of Sentila's secret visits to the pot makers' sheds, her father Mesoba is summoned before the village council and asked for explanation as to why the child has to resort to stealthy visits despite her mother and grandmother being the best pot makers of the village. At first Mesoba is scared that they might fine him for going against the traditions. He then lies that he has ordered a small tool for her to dig up clay and that she is going to be taught soon.

The parents cannot occupy formative roles during the development period of their children. Total adherence to the community and its traditions are the only viable options for both the parents as well as the children. The thought process is restricted and so is the absolute development of the individual. Arnela knows exactly what she wants and what she needs her daughter to do, but then she is severed by the rules of the community that she is part of. It was believed that during the days of head-hunting, their village was spared many a times only because of their skilled pot makers. Mesoba is also told by the council that the tradition and history of the community did not belong to any individual but to the entire community, implying that one person cannot have their own way about this skill of theirs, and no matter what the interest of the community prevails over that of a mother who wants something else for her daughter. The community thrusts its beliefs upon each of its members, sustained by superstitions and beliefs that not one person can move away from the system.

Pinyar follows strict adherence to her community and its beliefs. Even when Orka abandons her, she accepts the blame in total compliance. According to the laws of her clan, she alone was to be blamed. There was nothing anyone could do about it. Pinyar was not just a wife then, she was a mother too. The mother lost her child, but the community did not rush to restore the normalcy. The mother wailed but it fell on deaf ears. But Pinyar accepted her fate. She, along with her tribe felt that the mistake was completely hers. And when her house caught fire, she observed the period of taboo by shifting her stay to a shack the edge of the forest. All what she says is that her destiny is cursed. Pinyar, in fact, never realizes the need to step out of the rules set by her tribe. She firmly believes in each of it, and even in times of personal losses, she believes that it was caused by something supernatural. There is no friction between the individual and the clan.

As a member of a rigid tribe, Arnela, however dares to step out of the set norms. It is not because she finds weaving attractive, but she feels that pot making is a tiresome job. If she herself isn't fed up with the work, then why should she go against teaching this to her daughter? Thus, Arnela if given a chance would happily proclaim her free of all communal restrictions. On the other hand, Pinyar suffers all the ordeals even without understanding the base of her grief. She accepts that it is her fate and that it is cursed. She wears ornaments and amulets she once wore as a bride; she accepts her fate when her son is taken away, she feels that her husband was killed because men hallucinate when they take rice beer. She adheres to the system of beliefs even in the face of traumatic losses. Here, Arnela and Pinyar seems to be opposite in terms of how they respond to the advices of the community. Arnela goes to the extent of defying the very rubrics of the tribe that she is part of. But when summoned before the council, they are reminded that they will be fined, and anyone who goes against the community will be considered the enemy of the community. It is out of fear that they finally give into Sentila's wishes. But they fought to the maximum extent that they can. It is not fear that holds Pinyar close to the clan, but sheer faith in the system that she is part of, and it's beliefs.

The maternal instincts of these two women and how they are manifested in times of distress is worth giving attention. When Sentila says she wants to learn how to make pots, she, at first dissuades her verbally, telling her how difficult a job it is. But when she realizes that the child would not budge, she gives in after what Mesoba had to hear at the village council. Sentila is not taught nor given instructions as to what needs to be done. She looks at what everyone does, and then proceeds to make pots, each time failing miserably.

Arnela only looked at her, and never told her what needs to be done. Arnela even goes to the extent of pushing Sentila from her stool when she fails, and takes the spatula to make a pot and grin at her asking if she would ever be able to make such a pot. It was from Onula that she learns the art. This again is against the community because they say that the daughter must learn from the mother alone and not from anyone else. After getting a brief idea from Onula, she begins making better pots, much to the amazement of her mother. When Kamur is taken away, Pinyar wails, but then she blames herself for what has happened to her. He was brought back to her a year later and then taken away again. The outspoken Pinyar cries only when she talked about Kamur. Years later when Kamur becomes an able man, in a fit of madness he murders his children and attempts to kill his wife as well. He is arrested and sent to jail and Pinyar fights with the entire system to bail him out.

She stands by her son, and asks him to come along with her. Kamur seems to have been deeply distressed when he was separated from his mother when young. He says that he waited for her when he was sick and was shivering with fear. Pinyar takes him along with her and feels that the spirit needs to be exorcized and she does the needful in terms of it. It can be seen that Pinyar does everything to restore him back to his normal life. She stays by him and not even once asks him about what has happened. Whenever someone asked her about Kamur, she had all the words ready to absolve him of any sin. Later Kamur moves with his wife and lives at a far away place.

Though Arnela appears stubborn and cruel, it is only out of love that she performs thus. She wanted her daughter to have a life better than what she had, and tries all methods to discourage her from pursuing her passion. The reader might feel that Pinyar had forgotten her son, but it can be understood that it was not so when she fights with the entire world to protect her son. It is also surprising to note that Kamur never came looking for Pinyar at any point in his life. It was she who went after him, and once the problem was resolved, he went to another place with his wife and Pinyar never heard about them. Both the women cater to the needs of their children according to the demands of the situation in their own ways. They are neither wrong nor right, but the mother in them is always right.

The literature from the north-eastern part of India, as said before, is abound in images of myths and superstitions. They bring forth an idea of home, a kind of nostalgia that portrays the inimitable characteristic features of their tribes and community. The rich tradition of these beliefs is aptly portrayed in the two short stories. In *The Potmaker* the village is known for the pot making skills of its people, and it is believed that they were spared solely on account of their expertise in the art during times of war and distress. They held so strong to this belief that Mesoba is reminded of this when he is summoned before the village council. Onula, on seeing the rows of pots made by Sentila and Arnela is bewildered, because she knew Sentila was not an expert and that she was just a child. She understands the phenomenon that has taken place, that when one pot maker died, another had been born. The belief that the gift is transcended from the mother to the daughter, and that it happened when one died throws light on the kind of superstitions they follow.

In *Pinyar The Widow* there is a strict set of beliefs and myths that are followed by the tribe. When the story begins, Pinyar is nearing the end of the taboo period. According to their belief, the house catches fire because of the Tiger spirit, and anyone who engages with the owner then will be followed by the spirit.

So, the person must live in isolation for a specific period. It is blindly believed that a spirit causes fire, and not carelessness or any of the kind. It is not questioned, and the rule is followed. Pinyar is seen to be passing her silver ornament to the narrator and asks to hand it over to her daughter in law. She believes that it would bring success and luck, and says that faith is everything. Pinyar believes that no matter what happens in life, it is one's destiny that must be borne silently. She upholds her faith in the myths and superstitions of her tribe and never feels distraught at the tragic losses that has happened to her.

Another important belief is that of the "miti-mili" race and the "si-ye" cakes. According to the belief of the tribe, it was the "miti-mili" race that first made the "si-ye" cakes for the rice beer. They were supernatural beings, and suddenly, they got deranged visions and they soon disappeared. But before that they passed on the cake to mankind and asked them to be cautious. It was only the women who were allowed to use them to make the rice beer. Pinyar says that the beer makes men hallucinate and households had to strictly see to it that nobody took it before hunting or a journey. She says that people fail to observe these rules and that's why accidents happen. She even accrues this to be the reason why her husband got killed in a hunting accident. She did not accuse the person who killed her husband of murder, instead she believed in the tradition of the "si-ye".

When Kamur killed his own children, she did not see him as a murdered either. Pinyar thought it was a mistake on her part that she failed to observe the rites and rituals in the past. She calls priests to exorcize the spirit out of him, and she does not fall for grief in the tragedy that had happened. Even the people of the village thought that it was due to an evil spell. They said that an aubergine plant mysteriously grew to the height of a tree and Kamur was seen sitting under the tree during odd hours. Thus, the faith of the village in the evil, the supernatural and the mysterious forces them to find unnatural reasons for the things that happen among them.

Mamang Dai and Temsula Ao rightly portrays the village life and the customs of these tribes so accurately in their writings. Through Pinyar and Arnela the individual and the community is brought to discussion. They both observes what is right for them, Arnela in her personal convictions and Pinyar, in the rules of her tribe. The maternal instincts of both these women display a deep concord with what they think is right for their children. The lives of the people and the story of their losses are closely connected to the superstitions and myths of the tribe.

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