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Ecocritical Perspectives In Mamang Dai's *The Legends of Pensam*: Bridging Indigenous Knowledge And Environmental Consciousness

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Abstract: This paper examines Mamang Dai's novel *The Legends of Pensam* through an ecocritical lens, exploring the intricate relationship between humans and nature in the context of the Adi community in Arunachal Pradesh, India. By applying recent ecocritical theories to Dai's work, this study argues that the novel is a crucial intersection between indigenous ecological knowledge and contemporary environmental discourse. The analysis reveals how Dai's narrative techniques and thematic concerns challenge dominant paradigms of human-nature relationships, offering a nuanced perspective on environmental degradation, cultural resilience, and the impact of modernization on traditional ecological systems. This paper contributes to the growing body of ecocritical scholarship on Northeast Indian literature, highlighting the unique position of indigenous narratives in global environmental discussions.

Keywords: Ecocriticism, Indigenous Literature, Human-Nature Relationship, Anthropocene, Northeast Indian Literature

1. Introduction:

The relationship between humans and nature has been a central theme in literature across cultures and time periods. In recent decades, the emergence of ecocriticism as a theoretical framework has provided new tools for examining these relationships in literary texts. Mamang Dai's *The Legends of Pensam* (2006) offers a rich terrain for ecocritical analysis, presenting a unique perspective on the human-nature relationship that transcends simplistic dichotomies of domination or passive observation.

Mamang Dai is a celebrated poet and novelist writing in English. She hails from the state of Arunachal Pradesh, Land of the Rising Sun in the North Eastern part of India, and is one of the foremost writers of the region. She's known for her works in fiction, poetry, and journalism, often focusing on the cultural and natural landscapes of the Northeastern region of India. She is also the first woman IAS officer from the state. She however left the civil services to pursue her career in journalism and as a writer. She was conferred the Padma Shree Award in 2019 for her contribution to the field of literature and education in the year 2011. She is also a recipient of the Sahitya Akademi Award in 2017 for her novel *The Black Hill.* It is to be noted that she also worked with the World-Wide Fund for Nature in the Eastern Himalaya Biodiversity Hotspots program. Currently, she is the president of the Arunachal Pradesh Union of Working Journalists (APUW) and is a member of the Arunachal Pradesh State Public Service Commission.

Set against the lush backdrop of Arunachal Pradesh, Dai's *The Legends of Pensam* interweaves the lives of the Adi community with their natural environment, inviting readers to ponder the delicate balance that sustains both human cultures and ecosystems. This paper aims to explore how Dai's narrative techniques and thematic concerns align with and challenge ecocritical principles, contributing to our understanding of indigenous ecological perspectives in contemporary literature.

The significance of this study lies in its exploration of how indigenous literature, particularly from the Northeast Indian region, contributes to global environmental discourse. As climate change and ecological degradation become increasingly pressing issues, the insights offered by writers like Dai become crucial in reimagining sustainable human-nature relationships. By examining *The Legends of Pensam* through an ecocritical lens, we can gain valuable perspectives on alternative ways of conceptualizing and interacting with the natural world.

2. Methodology:

This study employs a close textual analysis of *The Legends of Pensam*, focusing on key passages that illustrate the novel's ecocritical themes. The analysis is grounded in recent ecocritical theory, particularly works published in the last decade that address indigenous perspectives and postcolonial ecocriticism. Comparative elements are introduced by referencing other Northeast Indian authors addressing similar themes. The selection of textual examples is based on their relevance to core ecocritical concepts such as interconnectedness, environmental justice, and the impact of modernization on traditional ecological knowledge. This multi-faceted approach allows for a comprehensive examination of *The Legends of Pensam*, situating it within both local and global ecocritical discourses.

3. Theoretical Framework and Literature Review:

Ecocriticism, as a literary and cultural theory, has evolved significantly since its emergence in the late 20th century. The study of the connection between literature and the natural world has advanced significantly, starting with Rachel Carson's groundbreaking work, *Silent Spring*, and continuing with Cheryll Glotfelty and Harold Fromm's *The Ecocriticism Reader*. Cheryll Glotfelty's foundational definition of ecocriticism as "the study of the relationship between literature and the physical environment" (xviii) has been expanded and nuanced by subsequent scholars. An ecocritical analysis of a text can yield several insights. Nayar concurs with Cheryll Glotfelty's idea that the genre of nature writing, which she refers to as devalued, requires one to regain professional dignity. According to Nayar,

> Ecocriticism is a critical mode that looks at the representation of nature and landscape texts, paying particular attention to attitudes towards “nature” and the rhetoric employed when speaking about it. It aligns itself with ecological activism and social theory with the assumption that the rhetoric of cultural texts reflects and informs material practices towards the environment while seeking to increase awareness about it and linking itself (and literary texts) with other ecological sciences and approaches (242)

Lawrence Buell's concept of "environmental imagination" remains relevant, particularly in analyzing how indigenous writers like Dai envision and articulate human-nature relationships. Buell argues that literary texts can shape our understanding of the environment and our place within it (Buell). This concept is particularly pertinent to Dai's work, which draws on Adi mythology and cultural practices to present a unique ecological vision.

However, more recent scholarship has aimed to decolonize ecocritical approaches. Elizabeth De Loughrey and George B. Handley, in *Postcolonial Ecologies: Literatures of the Environment*, emphasize the importance of incorporating local ecological knowledge and historical contexts into ecocritical analyses. They argue that postcolonial literature often portrays the environment as an active participant in historical transformations rather than as a static backdrop (De Loughrey and Handley). This perspective is essential for understanding

Dai's depiction of the Arunachal Pradesh landscape as an active agent in the community's history and contemporary life.

Ursula Heise's concept of "eco-cosmopolitanism" provides a valuable framework for placing Dai's work within global environmental discourses while remaining sensitive to local ecological contexts. Heise advocates for an "environmental world citizenship" that balances global awareness with local knowledge. This perspective enables us to explore how Dai's portrayal of the Adi community contributes to what Heise describes as a "sense of planet"—a global environmental consciousness grounded in local realities (Heise).

Anupama explores the deep connection between North East Indian poets and their natural surroundings, emphasizing how "nature becomes a space where an individual identifies himself" and highlighting the poets' ecological awareness and concern for environmental degradation (Anupama 61). This perspective aligns seamlessly with Mamang Dai's portrayal of nature in *The Legends of Pensam*, where the natural world is not merely a backdrop but a fundamental component of cultural identity and personal reflection. Das highlights how Mamang Dai's *The Legends of Pensam* intertwines the Adi tribe's animistic beliefs with their natural environment, depicting spirits and evils as integral parts of their worldview (Das 7).

Malik critically examines *The Legends of Pensam* by Mamang Dai, highlighting its ecological themes and the integration of history, myth, tradition, memory, and fiction to reflect the unique ecology of Arunachal Pradesh. He discusses the impact of colonialism on traditional values and environmental degradation, arguing that the novel advocates for reconnecting with nature to preserve tribal identities amid globalization and modernization. Malik posits that restoring this bond is crucial for maintaining ecological and cultural integrity. The novel underscores the urgent need for sustainable practices, prompting readers to reflect on the environmental consequences of human actions (Malik).

Ecocriticism explores the relationship between literature and the physical environment, emphasizing the interconnectedness of human and natural worlds. In indigenous practices, this relationship is often deeply ingrained, reflecting a harmonious coexistence with nature. Riddi and Mize provide a detailed account of the intricate rituals performed by the Adi tribe, which emphasize harmony with nature, resonating with Mamang Dai's portrayal of a similar ethos in *The Legends of Pensam*. In the novel, characters' interactions with their environment are marked by a profound sense of respect and interconnectedness (Riddi and Mize). Jana and Dutta also discuss the ecological concerns in *The Legends of Pensam*, highlighting the Adi tribe's deep connection with their natural environment and exploring how Dai's narrative portrays the Adi community's animistic faith, which is closely tied to forest ecology and the natural world (Jana and Dutta).

Another significant aspect of Mamang Dai's ecological exploration in *The Legends of Pensam* is the integration of spiritual elements. Satapathy and Nayak analyze how the novel highlights the ethnographic substantiation of the Adi tribe's spiritual practices, deeply interwoven with nature. They describe the tribe's animistic faith and rituals, such as the serpent ritual performed to prevent misfortune (Satapathy and Nayak 3). The novel integrates legends, myths, and mountain rituals to depict the spiritual and cultural identity of the Adi people (1). This analysis reinforces the notion that Dai's work is a symphony of nature where ecological and spiritual elements harmoniously coexist.

4. Analysis of *The Legends of Pensam*

4.1. Interconnectedness and Symbiosis

Mamang Dai's novel offers a compelling portrayal of the interconnectedness between humans and the natural world, a core principle of ecocriticism. The depiction of the Adi community's belief in nature as a living entity with its own consciousness and agency aligns with the concept of the "more-than-human world," as articulated by ecologist David Abram. This perspective underscores the idea that the natural environment is not merely a setting for human activity but a dynamic participant in its own right (Abram). By emphasizing this view, Dai's

narrative challenges anthropocentric understandings and highlights the profound spiritual and ecological connections that bind humans to their environment. This perspective is exemplified in passages such as:

> "When you look at the land you forget your aches and pains" (Dai xi).

This sentiment reflects a deep connection to the land that goes beyond mere appreciation of natural beauty. It suggests a symbiotic relationship where the well-being of humans is intimately tied to the health of the environment. The land is portrayed not just as a physical space, but as a healing presence, highlighting the psychological and emotional dimensions of the human-nature relationship.

This interconnectedness represents a central tenet of ecocriticism, underscoring the profound relationship between humans and their environment. The cyclical rhythms of life and the bond that binds all living beings are central to Dai's narrative. This perspective aligns with the broader ecocritical discourse that advocates for a holistic understanding of nature, recognizing the interdependence of all life forms. Greg Garrard states, "Much ecocriticism has taken for granted that its task is to overcome anthropocentrism, just as feminism seeks to overcome androcentrism. The metaphysical argument for biocentrism is meant to sustain moral claims about the intrinsic value of the natural world, which will in turn affect our attitudes and behavior towards nature" (176).

Dai's *The Legends of Pensam* further elucidates this interconnectedness through the lived experiences of her characters, demonstrating how intrinsic cultural narratives function as both a mirror and a response to the ecological realities they encounter, ultimately engendering a profound reverence for the natural world (Satapathy and Nayak). This dynamic interplay between tradition and ecology illustrates that the characters' identities are not solely shaped by their cultural heritage, but are also inextricably bound to their inhabited landscapes. This relationship suggests that a comprehensive understanding of one's environment is advantageous and essential for survival and forming an identity within these communities.

The cyclical rhythms of life depicted in the novel resonate with ecocritical notions of bioregionalism. For instance, Dai writes:

> It rains during the day, it rains all night. It can rain non-stop for sixty-two days at a time. Not a peep of sunshine. Not a breath of wind. Every summer the tangled undergrowth clinging to the hills is swept away by the downpour, causing landslides that cut off all communication and links (37).

This passage not only portrays the local climate but also underscores the community's profound familiarity with their environment, a crucial element of bioregional thinking as articulated by Berg and Dasmann. The intricate depiction of the rain cycle and its impact on the landscape exemplifies a nuanced comprehension of local ecological dynamics. While this portrayal aligns with ecocritical tenets, it simultaneously challenges idealized conceptions of human-nature symbiosis by illuminating the often unforgiving realities of existing in close proximity to natural cycles. This dual perspective offers a more complex and realistic representation of human-environment interactions, moving beyond simplistic narratives of harmonious coexistence (Berg and Dasmann).

4.2. Resilience and Resistance of Nature

Dai's depiction of nature as embodying resilience and resistance aligns with Nixon's concept of "slow violence" in environmental literature (Nixon). This portrayal elucidates the gradual, often imperceptible ecological degradation occurring over extended temporal scales. The landscape in Dai's work functions as both witness to and participant in the subtle transformations affecting indigenous communities. By ascribing qualities of endurance to nature, Dai underscores the protracted ecological and cultural ramifications of environmental change, echoing Nixon's emphasis on recognizing and addressing these nuanced forms of violence against both ecosystems and marginalized populations.

> The texture and speed of change was visible in strange ways all across the land. A visitor coming to the town for the first time would still see the green hills, the green bamboo, and the green river flowing in all directions, but now there were young men on motorcycles roaring across the stones while young picnickers wearing fake fur and woolen caps waved at passers-by (Dai 188).

This passage illustrates nature's persistence in the face of change, a theme that resonates with ecocritical discussions of environmental justice and the long-term impacts of ecological degradation. The juxtaposition of the enduring green landscape with the modern intrusions of motorcycles and changing fashion highlights the tension between tradition and modernity, nature and culture.

4.3. **Impact of Modernization and Anthropocene on Ecological Balance**

In *The Legends of Pensam*, Mamang Dai vividly captures the Anthropocene's impact on the natural environment, emphasizing the pervasive human influence on the landscape. Dai's description of environmental degradation is poignant:

> The town was permanently awash in debris. Plastic floated across the hills, clung to river banks, perched on trees. Broken glass and discarded packaging scarred the bald slopes closest to the town. Workmen sucked on wet bidis and chipped away at the mountainside. Their women stood by and looked askance with dark savage eyes (Dai 164).

This passage encapsulates the Anthropocene's central premise—where human activity emerges as the predominant force shaping the environment, often to its detriment. It reflects the Anthropocene's defining feature—human activity as the dominant force shaping the environment. The image of plastic and other debris littering the hills and rivers symbolizes a broader ecological crisis, where nature is suffocated by human-made materials that do not decompose. Furthermore, the workmen "chipping away at the mountainside" and the indifferent gaze of the onlooking women highlight a disconnect between human labor, survival, and environmental degradation. This scene portrays the irreversible changes humans impose on the Earth, underlining the Anthropocene's theme of significant human impact on geology and ecosystems. Dai's narrative urges readers to reflect on the consequences of these actions, reminding us of the urgent need for environmental stewardship and sustainable living practices.

This vivid imagery aligns with ecocritical concerns about the environmental costs of development and globalization, particularly in indigenous contexts. The description of plastic waste and environmental destruction serves as a stark contrast to the earlier portrayals of pristine natural beauty, highlighting the rapid and devastating changes brought about by modernization.

However, Dai's approach is nuanced, avoiding a simplistic condemnation of all forms of modernization. Instead, she presents a complex picture of a community grappling with rapid change, highlighting both the allure and the destructive potential of modern development. This is evident in her portrayal of characters who are caught between traditional ways of life and the promises of modernity:

> The texture and speed of change was visible in strange ways all across the land. In the run-up to the volleyball tourney this year, I heard that the Motum village team had been disqualified because one of their players tried to play holding a bottle of beer in one hand (Dai 188).

This humorous yet poignant anecdote illustrates the cultural dissonance created by the influx of modern consumer goods and practices into traditional communities. It highlights the challenges faced by indigenous communities as they navigate the complex terrain of modernization while striving to maintain their cultural identity and ecological balance.

5. Comparative Analysis

When compared to other Northeast Indian authors addressing similar themes, Dai's approach in *The Legends of Pensam* stands out for its lyrical quality and its seamless integration of myth and reality. For instance, Temsula Ao's *These Hills Called Home: Stories from a War Zone* (2006) also explores the relationship between people and their environment in the context of social and political upheaval. However, while Ao's work often foregrounds the human drama against an environmental backdrop, Dai's narrative gives equal weight to the natural world, presenting it as an active participant in the unfolding stories. This distinction is particularly evident in their respective treatments of the landscape. Ao's narratives tend to position nature as a silent witness to human conflicts and sociopolitical upheavals, using the Naga Hills as a context for exploring themes of identity, violence, and cultural change.

In contrast, Dai elevates the natural world from mere scenery to a vital force within her narrative. Through her lyrical prose and intricate storytelling, Dai imbues the rivers, forests, and mountains of Arunachal Pradesh with agency and voice, making them integral to both plot development and the characters' spiritual and cultural experiences. This approach highlights the profound, inherent relationship between the Adi people and their environment, offering a worldview in which the boundaries between human and non-human elements are fluid and frequently indistinct. By doing so, Dai's work not only showcases a unique ecocritical perspective but also offers readers insight into the animistic beliefs and ecological consciousness central to Adi cosmology. This narrative strategy effectively bridges indigenous knowledge systems with contemporary environmental discourse, presenting a nuanced portrayal of human-nature relationships that enriches our understanding of Northeast Indian literature and culture.

Easterine Kire's novel *When the River Sleeps* (2014) offers an interesting point of comparison to Dai's work. Set in Nagaland, Kire's narrative shares Dai's reverence for the natural world and its spiritual significance. In her novel, Kire portrays the forest as more than just trees and animals, describing it as a living, breathing entity holding secrets and powers beyond human understanding. This echoes Dai's portrayal of nature as a sentient participant in human affairs. However, while Dai often emphasizes the harmonious interconnectedness of humans and nature, Kire's work explores the potential for conflict between human desires and natural forces. This adds a layer of complexity to the ecocritical discourse of the region, highlighting the diverse approaches to human-nature relationships in Northeast Indian literature.

With nature playing a prominent part in the poetry and short stories of Ao, Dai, and Kire, there is a strong undercurrent of nostalgia. Trees, mountains, rivers, and animals are used as metaphors to discuss identity loss and the disconnection between humans and the natural world. Their views on how humans relate to nature generally have the effect of helping readers understand what it was like to live in harmony with the natural world, which heightens their awareness of ecological issues (Kamei 204).

6. Conclusion:

Mamang Dai's "The Legends of Pensam" offers a profound contribution to ecocritical literature, bridging indigenous ecological knowledge with contemporary environmental concerns. Through her nuanced portrayal of the Adi community's relationship with their environment, Dai challenges dominant paradigms of human-nature relationships and presents a perspective that is both locally grounded and globally relevant.

This analysis reveals several key insights:

1. Dai's work exemplifies a unique form of ecocriticism that is deeply rooted in indigenous worldviews, challenging Western-centric notions of nature and environmental consciousness.

2. The novel's portrayal of interconnectedness and symbiosis between humans and nature offers a model for reimagining sustainable ecological relationships in the face of global environmental crises.

3. Dai's narrative techniques, particularly her use of myth and oral tradition, demonstrate how indigenous storytelling can enrich and expand ecocritical discourse.

4. The depiction of nature's resilience and resistance in the face of modernization provides a nuanced perspective on environmental change, avoiding simplistic narratives of degradation or romanticization.

5. Comparative analysis with other Northeast Indian authors highlights Dai's distinctive approach in presenting nature as an active agent in cultural and historical processes.

These findings have significant implications for the field of ecocriticism:

1. They underscore the need for more diverse voices in ecocritical discourse, particularly from indigenous and postcolonial perspectives.

2. They demonstrate the value of integrating traditional ecological knowledge into contemporary environmental discussions.

3. They suggest new ways of conceptualizing resilience and resistance in nature that go beyond anthropocentric views.

4. They offer a model for how literature can engage with environmental issues without sacrificing cultural specificity or narrative complexity.

5. They challenge ecocritics to develop more nuanced understandings of human-nature relationships that account for diverse cultural and historical contexts.

Future research could further explore the intersection of indigenous knowledge systems and contemporary environmental challenges, not only in Northeast India but in other indigenous contexts globally. Additionally, investigating how works like "The Legends of Pensam" can inform practical approaches to environmental conservation and sustainable development could bridge the gap between literary ecocriticism and applied environmental studies.

In conclusion, the seemingly effortless narrative style found in novels such as *The Legends of Pensam* is a hallmark of accomplished storytellers like Mamang Dai. *The Legends of Pensam* exemplifies how literature can profoundly reshape our understanding of the complex relationship between humans and nature. By foregrounding indigenous ecological perspectives, Dai's work not only contributes significantly to the field of ecocriticism but also provides crucial insights for tackling the urgent environmental issues we face today.

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