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Localizing Praxis and Performance in Mamang Dai's *The Legends of Pensam*

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Abstract:

This article attempts to analyse a novel by the renowned writer from the North-East – Mamang Dai, as a novel of cultural resistance. Dai's *The Legends of Pensam* presents the Adi community of Arunachal Pradesh and its ethnic life-world to show how a tribal community, living in the periphery of the nation-state can offer resistance to the centre's politics of appropriation and assimilation. The community's life-philosophy, myths, oral-narratives and cultural practices become useful tropes to resist the hegemonic forces, and to sustain the ethnic identity. The Adi people's indigenous rituals and myths are handed over to the next generations through a continuous process of retelling and repeated performances. They live like a collective force to keep their cultural legacy intact and to stick to the roots.

Keywords: Hegemonic suppression, discourse of resistance, cultural legacy, local culture.

Russell A. Potter in an essay titled "History-Spectacle -Resistance" focuses on the issue of the hegemonic culture in the United States and considers hip-hop as a powerful mode of resistance to such forces. This essay is about the experience of the African-Americans in the contemporary American culture. Potter finds the history of the African-American cultures to be the most astonishing and empowering account of resistance. He traces in the history of the African-American cultures certain strategies which form and sustain a culture against the dominant or hegemonic culture. The African-American cultures have mobilized some "cultures of the *found*, the *revalued*, the *used*" (Potter 2007: 458), through a network of localized sites and nomadic incursions. Potter traces this remaking and revaluation in hip-hop as it uses the African-American tradition of signifying. He comments that it becomes a performance where passive reception is not possible. The hip-hop audiences do not merely listen, it is not merely a form of music; hip-hop is a cultural recycling centre, a social heterolect, a field of contest and a form of psychological warfare. Potter also refers to the importance of history in the act of resistance to the hegemonic American culture; he says that history is a potential form of resistance. The past is usually represented as an arbitrary series of dates and events and a process of de-historicization follows. In such context hip-hop may serve as a vehicle for telling the repressed histories of the African-American culture. Potter says: "In the face of this homogenized, safety-sealed version of history, hip-hop brings back the musical past that many white and middle-class listeners have

conventionally forgotten”(Potter 2007: 465).Tim Prentki, in an essay titled “Surviving the Monoculture: Land, Language, Identity Corpses, Zombies or Life after Mcdonalds has focused on the similar issues highlighted by Potter in the context of the African-American cultures. Prentki in this essay particularly discusses the neo-colonial process which operates under the label of globalization and tries to erase cultural diversities and creates in turn a globalized monoculture. Prentki, in this essay, tries to define cultural invasion as a significant mode of colonial discourse, which is even more powerful than military invasion. He says that often cultural resistance forms in “a new found confidence in indigenous knowledge-system; from the over-determinations of the trans-national corporations to the self-determination of the local community” (Prentki 2005:164). Prentki emphasizes on the need to maintain a dynamic cultural life in a constant process of dialogue and to revive the histories, myths and former identities. Although Prentki in this essay discusses the hybridization and negotiation of cultures by combining local elements of performance culture with the elements of globalized practices, he also expresses suspicion regarding the damage of the marginal culture by external cultures. His chief focus is on globalization’s creation of a monoculture, but some of the issues raised by him in relation to resistant cultures can be applied to all marginal cultures under hegemonic suppression.

The Legends of Pensam – a novel by Mamang Dai, can be interpreted in the light of resistant narrative. The novel portrays the Adi community of Arunachal Pradesh and the tribal people’s desire to preserve their ethnic identity. Their unique cultural practices as well as their life-philosophy reflect an attempt to resist the politics of appropriation and all sort of incursion by alien forces. The Adi community in the novel gets engaged with a process of re-description of their ethnic identity, through various localizing praxes and performances. Russell A.Potter’s definition of hip-hop as a mode of counter-culture and Tim Prentki’s comment on indigenous knowledge-system as a resistant trope, can be applied to the Adi community’s local cultural practices and to the tribe’s world-view in *The Legends of Pensam*. In the novel, Mamang Dai has shown how the tribal community has chosen local myths and cultures as a trope for resisting hegemonic forces. In this context an essay titled “ Rootedness : The Ancestor as Foundation”, by Tony Morrison can be mentioned. Morrison’s comment on the function of the artist is significant here; she says: “...an artist could be genuinely representative of the tribe and in it; when an artist could have a tribal or racial sensibility and an individual expression of it” (Morrison 2004: 302). As Russell A. Potter has focused on the African-American cultures and hip-hop as a resisting mode of cultural practice, Morrison here has discussed the political nature of art and literature and the basic features of the African-American literature or Black art. Morrison, while discussing how an individual becomes a part of the community, refers to an interesting rite found in the Black churches. Sometimes in the Black churches people shout out of grief and to offer a personal statement. It is done out of trust for the community and within the context of the community. The shouter performs some rite that is extremely subjective and the other people performing as the community protect that person. For Morrison it is an example of a public and a private expression going on at the same time. Apart from mentioning this interesting rite found in

the Black churches which serves as a medium of assimilating the individual to the community, Morrison also comments on the genre of the novel as a medium to accomplish certain very strong functions. A novel should have something so that it can enlighten, can open the door and point the way. The Black art has both oral and print literature. The stories as a consequence, can be read in silence and one can hear them as well. In Black art, Morrison points out, the primary importance is given to the effective and participatory relationship between the artist or the speaker and the audience. She says : “To make the story appear oral, meandering, effortless, spoken – to have the reader *feel* the narrator without identifying that narrator, or hearing him or her knock about, and to have the reader work *with* the author in the construction of the book – is what’s important”(Morrison 2004:304). She says that there should be the presence of a chorus, addressing the community or the reader at large, community on the action as it goes ahead. As a whole, in the African -American writing, the basic features are the presence of an oral quality, the participation of the reader and the presence of the chorus. Morrison also talks about the presence of an ancestor, an elder–some timeless people whose relationships to the characters are benevolent, instructive and protective. The ancestors or the timeless people also provide certain kinds of wisdom. In Mamang Dai’s *The Legends of Pensam*, the character of Hoxo, the shaman or the miri can be identified as such ancestors or timeless people. In the section titled “Songs of the Rhapsodist” of the novel, the narrative focus is on the small histories, myths and memories of the Adi community of Arunachal Pradesh. The narrator, who witnesses the community’s collective memory being enacted in various myths and cultural performances, comments: “...myth and memory would be reborn in the song of the ponung dancers”(Dai 2006: 50). The ponung dancers are led by the miri, the shaman and the rhapsodist. The narrator and her friend are the audience who watch the dance of the ponung dancers and listen to the narrative of the rhapsodist. The ponung dancers arrive the crucial point in the narration of their history where they ‘travel the road’ – which metaphorically signifies the collective journey of the community, their cultural legacy found in the form of myths and rituals being handed over to the next generations and a process of cultural continuation. The narrator defines the shaman as “a shadow man leaping up larger than life”, and as a guardian of the stories and rhapsodies of time and destiny. He remembers the myths of the community and restores them to life. The act of remembering the stories of the past and performing them before the audience is a kind of praxis which preserves the local culture, myths and memories and ties the individual to the community and to the roots.

The character of Nenem in the novel becomes a metaphor of the community’s spirit. She refuses to leave her roots, her community and her tribal land while rejecting the idea of going to a foreign land with her lover David, a British man. She marries a man from her own community and remains devoted to her roots: “Together they would raise a family, guard their land and live among their people observing the ancient customs of their clan” (Dai 2006:120). It can be mentioned here that ‘Khampti’ – another tribe from Arunachal Pradesh etymologically means “stick to the roots”. The tribal people of the region consider themselves different and perceive the outer world with suspicion. The narrator, who is from the tribal land and community but does

not stay there, feels that even after the absence of hundred years, she would recognize the land again, even if no record survives.

In the author's note of the novel it has been mentioned that the Adis in Arunachal Pradesh practise an animalistic faith that is woven around forest ecology and the natural world. The myths narrated in the novel depict stories where man and nature co-exist. Hoxo, the teller of myths and histories of the community is supposed to fall from the sky. To show that there is an intimate relationship between Hoxo and the world of nature, it is said: "The colour green always soothed him. It was the colour of escape and solitude" (Dai 2006:8). The stories of the community are "fixed in their collective memory" which create a world of their own. The novel also depicts certain rituals of the community which preserve their cultural identity and serve as a localizing praxis showing their difference from the outer world. There is a description in the novel how Hoxo conducts the serpent ritual to negotiate with the spirits for calling them to restore a sick child. The narrator comments on Hoxo : "He seemed to live in a timeless zone and from a great distance..."(Dai 2006 : 24). The lives of the Adis are centred around some age -old beliefs and the community believes that in order to maintain order and peace in their world, it is essential to follow certain rites. A women named Pinyar says : "My boy is being haunted by an evil spirit because we failed to observe certain rites in the past"(Dai 2006: 33). The rites being performed, stories being told through myths, song and performance of dances – all are part of a localizing praxis and performance for the community. Even people like Hoxo and Nenem serve as metaphor of the community's inner spirit, its desire to stick to the roots. Hoxo is represented as the teller of tales, as the storehouse of the community's myths and memories. On the other hand, about Nenem it is said that she is more than an individual and is rather an embodiment of the community's life - philosophy: "Nenem, appropriately, was a gift from the mythical land among the stars that was the dwelling place of a beautiful bride, also known as the celestial aunt, who came down to bless the civilization of men with wisdom and grace"(Dai 2006 : 125). The role of Hoxo and Nenem in *The Legends of Pensam* can be identified with Tony Morrison's idea of an ancestor or an elder of a community. Similarly Morrison's reference to the rite performed by a shouter in the Black church which connects him to the community can be applied to the Adi community's rites and local performances which transform an individual from a mere spectator or a passive participant to an active performer or listener. As the hip -hop performance of the African -Americans becomes a powerful means of cultural resistance, the Adi community's performance of their rites, their oral narrative of histories and local myths become a strong medium of framing an exclusive site for maintaining the cultural legacy. Michel de Certeau, in *The Practice of Everyday Life* has discussed the power of popular cultures and ordinary language. He focuses on how popular culture, folk-tales or stories do serious services by subverting the established order of a society. He calls the carrier of popular cultures "the rural believers", who stick to certain superstitions to create their own discourse of resistance. The popular culture intervenes into the existing order of things, becomes "a dark rock that resists all assimilation" (Certeau 1988: 18). Certeau's discussion of the practices of everyday life, of popular culture and language extends to the field of folk-tales. He comments: "The formality of

everyday practices is indicated in these tales, which frequently reserve the relationships of power and, like the stories of miracles, ensure the victory of the unfortunate in a fabulous, utopian space. This space protects the weapons of the weak against the reality of the established order (Certeau 1988 : 23). In Certeau's interpretation folk - tale becomes a powerful social and cultural medium. He is of the opinion that recorded or official historiography operates the strategies of instituted powers, whereas the "fabulous" stories or folk-tales offer some tactics of counter-narrative or resistance to their audience. From this perspective Mamang Dai's *The Legends of Pensam*, where the myths and the popular tales of the community serve as significant element of the narrative, creates a subversive narrative of the hegemonic forces—which may be the nationalistic concept of monoculture or other authoritative forces. Certeau says that the stylistic effects of the folk -tales devices and figures, alliterations, inversions and plays on words serve as the tropes for resistance to the established order. He calls the folk -tales the "living museums" of resistant tactics. As a whole, the folk - tales, myths or popular culture can be termed as practice of an ordinary art form, the effect of which is large on the minds of the people. Certeau discusses how the ordinary man or 'everyman' turns into a teller of significant tales. He says : "Rather than being merely represented in it, the ordinary man acts out the text itself, in an by the text, and in addition he makes plausible the universal character of the particular place in which the mad discourse of a knowing wisdom is pronounced"(Certeau 1988 : 2). Certeau's definition of the ordinary man as the teller of tales extends into the distinction between the Expert and the Philosopher, although both have similar functions : "the task of mediating between society and a body of knowledge". The Expert blots out the Philosopher – the specialist of the universal. The Expert becomes an 'interpreter' and a 'translator', speaks as an ordinary man. It can be said that Certeau's definition of popular culture as a powerful medium, folk -tales as a mode of resistance and the ordinary man's ability to become an 'Expert' to tell the tales of the community can be applied to the narrative strategies of *The Legends of Pensam*. The narrative of this novel is woven around the folk-tales, small histories and myths of the community. As Roland Barthes in an essay titled "Myth Today" has defined myth as a mode of signification or a form rather than an object or an idea, it can be said in the context of *The Legends of Pensam* that the folk-tales, histories, myths and other traditional rites and performances of the Adi community serve as a mode of signification, which is infinitely fertile in suggestions. Barthes says: "Every object in the world can pass form a closed, silent existence to an oral state..."(Barthes 1998: 109). Similarly in *The Legends of Pensam*, the unique mode of signification emerging through the narration of folk-tales, histories and myths of the tribal community creates a local world. The cultural heritage of the community, performed repeatedly through oral narratives, songs and dances, becomes alive, becomes a dynamic system of communication.

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