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## Reconceptualization of Indigenous Knowledge of North-East India: A Study Through Eco-Critical Lens

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### **Abstract:**

The human race and its relationship with the environment are going through rapid evolution. But somehow this rapid evolution is still struggling to engulf the tribal world and change the attitude to nature. The tribal life revolves around nature. The daily activities of the tribes are a repository of indigenous knowledge. Northeast India is known as the melting pot of many races, castes, and cultures since it is home to several ethnic groups with a range of customs, languages, and faiths. The tribes of Northeast India have possessed a wide and sophisticated body of indigenous knowledge. They revere nature and acknowledge its power. They are the practitioners of animism. Thus, a productive relation between the tribes of Northeast and aspects of nature is visible. According to the tribes, every natural object has a soul that has the power to bestow both blessings and curses. The spirits dwell in the dense forest and hardly interfere in the community life unless the community or the members of community fail to obey certain rules. To satisfy the souls and evade themselves from the soul's curse they preserve nature. Based on Mamang Dai's *The Legends of Pensam*, the researcher through this article aims to reconceptualize the indigenous knowledge of the land through eco-critical lens. The researcher will shed light on the roles of life forces, souls and spirits in everyday life of the Aids of Arunachal Pradesh.

**Keywords:** Northeast India, Indigenous Knowledge, animism, ecology.

The Northeast part of India is one of the remotest and most suppressed regions of India.

The land is almost disconnected from the mainland. The only connection is the 22 km long corridor that is popularly known as the 'chicken-neck'. As the Northeast Indian people remain secluded from the mainstream cultural and societal wave, they framed their own culture and societal system. Northeast India emerged as Amit R Baishya noted as 'disturbed land' in his book *Contemporary Literature from Northeast India: Deathworlds, Terror and Survival*. The outsiders consider the land as problematize zone. This problem is caused by the

issues of identity crisis, language crisis, domination of military and so on. The creative writers from the land like Temsula Ao, Mamang Dai, Kynpham Sing Nongkynrih, Aruni Kashyap depicted these in their writings. Apart from these they also use their pen to draw a pen-picture of this beautiful land as well as the Northeast India's tribes' unique everyday life, culture and belief system. They even incorporated in their writings the tribals' age-old myths, traditions, folklores etc. The writers are also every much conscious about the degradation of environment. For them the outsiders, particularly the Whites trespasses the land to destroy the naturalness of nature for their own economic gain. As part of resistance, they raise their voice to preserve the nature through literary writings. They show the amalgamation of nature and tribal life. Mamang Dai, the renowned essayist, novelist and poet from Northeast India depicts her own personal experiences in the novel *The Legends of Pensam*. Dai herself is the daughter of this 'troubled land', more specifically the own daughter of Arunachal Pradesh. She through her innovative writing style and storytelling skill makes the outsiders familiar with the Adis. Her portrayal is realistic and capable of offering a kind of sensual experience to the readers. She very masterly mingles the present and past, tradition and modernity in the novel. Tilottoma Mishra, eminent scholar and academician in the 'Introduction' section of her book *The Oxford Anthology of Writings from North-East India Poetry and Essay* discusses about the precarious condition of the Adis in today's globalized world. She expresses her empathy for the Adi people who are forced to change stream of their life in accordance with what is needed in the modern world. Kailash C. Baral in "Articulating Marginality: Emerging Literatures from Northeast India" regards Dai as the cultural historian of Northeast India because she through her fictions, short stories and poems gives us the information from which we can learn about the Adis' past. Dai as a responsible daughter of Northeast selflessly tries to preserve the rich culture, tradition, heterogeneity and indigenous knowledge of the Northeast India. In an interaction with Subash N. Jeyan in *The Hindu*, she says

Ours is an oral tradition you know; I was trying to meet people and collect and record these oral narratives. You know, the small histories which were getting lost and when you talk to people even small things can trigger these memories off. (1)

Mamang Dai remains true and honest to her own words in the novel *The Legends of Pensam* by mingling the indigenous customs, history and myths of the community. She also incorporates the natural landscape, natural elements, environment and ecology to reveal the

consciousness of the tribes regarding environmental issues Her intention is to "return to nature" by tracing the history of the Adi community through the intertwined stories. Gunjan Dey in her article "Writing for an Endangered Nature and Culture: An Ecocritical Reading of Mamang Dai's *The Legends of Pensam*" writes:

These stories are spread across a few generations of a family as a result of which the same characters reappear in most of the tales, giving the book a more or less novel like structure. Traditional tribal beliefs form the nucleus of the lives of the characters in this book; spirits, shamans and unnatural events influence their lives in more ways than one. This indicates web of stories gradually unfolds into the history of a tribe. This book is an intermingling of myth and history of the tribe of Adis of the Siang valley.... (86)

The Adis are one of the primitive tribes of India. The main tenets of their society are animism and supernaturalism. Their everyday life revolves around these two. These two aspects are deeply accustomed with environment and ecology. The tribes believe that 'Shaman' in their society is the divinely inspired messenger who possess the ability to negotiate with the spirits. The present age is age of internet and where globalization is everyday reality. As result of globalization above-mentioned culture and belief systems are under the radar of eruption. The society is rapidly changing because of the modern touch. Northeast, more specifically the Adi village of Arunachal Pradesh can't evade itself from its clutch. The touch of modernity gradually swallows the tribal culture. It impacted badly the tribes' tradition, cultural belief systems as well as the ecological balance of the land. The present paper seeks to understand the deep relation between the nature and tribal life. Based on Dai's novel *The Legends of Pensam* this article attempts to rediscover the gradually erupting indigenous knowledge system of the Adis with especial reference to animism from eco-critical perspective.

The Northeast India because of the presence of thick dense forest is considered as one of the major 'biodiversity hotspots' of India. Within Northeast India Arunachal Pradesh possesses the deep forest. In recent times because of the class between tribes and outsiders over environmental issues the academic as well as creative writers of the land through their writing highlighting the close relation between the nature and tribal life. Thus, they are showing empathy to the tribes. It is also an attempt of raising their voice for the protection of nature. They try their best to make environmental issues of Northeast India the focal point of debate and discussion. The environmentalists and researchers' main concern in green studies in

contemporary time is to understand, analyse and find solution of environmental deterioration, imbalance of ecology and its direct effect on individual. Because of these the novel under discussion can be viewed and studied through the lens of green studies which is popularly known in academia as eco-critical study.

The green studies or eco-critical studies is comparative new in academia but the relation between men and environment is age old. The eco-critical study mainly tries to locate presence of environment and nature in literary and cultural texts. Cheryll Glotfelty, in the 'Introduction' to *The Ecocritical Reader: Landmarks in Literary Ecology* defines eco-criticism as "the study of relationship between literature and physical environment" (xviii). For Chinganbam Anupama "eco-criticism deals with the expression of judgement upon the writings which marks the relation between nature and man or effects of culture on nature" (2014). For Kerridge ecocriticism is "literary and cultural criticism from an environmentalist point of view" (2006). Eco-criticism is also known as 'Green Studies'. Both "Green Studies" and eco-criticism are very popular. It may have started in the UK and the US in the early 1990s as a subgenre of literary critique used in academic settings. Glotfelty became the first person to have a professorship in literature and environment at the University of Nevada in Reno in the 1990s.

The Northeast India's tribal religion and culture honour the environment. People and nature there possess an unconditional bond. The Adis of Arunachal Pradesh believes in the existence of invisible spirits in their daily course of life. For them it is so powerful that it even controls the rainfall and fertility of the land. They again believe that the spirits dwell in the dense forests, so they never exploit the nature. The coexistence between human and nature in Northeast India hints the tribes' faith on animism. "The Adi people believe that the creator blesses plants, objects and natural things such as weather with a living soul". (Mahato & Saha , 91). This is crucial to understand their life. From the perspective of ecocriticism, Mamang Dai's observations in *The Legends of Pensam* about the Adi community in the author's note carries enormous significance: "Like the majority of tribes inhabiting the central belt of Arunachal, the Adis practice an Animistic faith that is woven around forest ecology and co-existence with the natural world. "(9)

This animism-related observation powerfully suggests that the Adi community and the natural world are one and the same. The idea of animism believes that everything found in nature is alive because it possesses a soul or spirit. Regarding animism Carolyn Rooney in his book *African Literature, Animism and Politics* says,

The belief in spirits which inhabit or are identified with parts of the natural world, such as rocks, trees, rivers and mountains. In the nineteenth century, writers such as Sir Edward Tylor argued that animism represented an early form of religion, one which preceded theistic religions in the evolution of 'primitive thought'. The term is sometimes used loosely to cover religious beliefs of indigenous population groups, e.g. in Africa and North America, prior to the introduction of Christianity, and is still widely used to describe the religious practice of so-called tribal or indigenous groups in areas like Southeast Asia. (28)

The lap of nature is dearest to all. Both human and animals find solace in it. Jacob in his dream in the Bible says nature the house of God and gateway to heaven. The belief that every aspect of nature possesses a living soul first officially mentioned by E.B Taylor. For Taylor animism is "the belief in souls and in a future state, in controlling deities and subordinate spirits, these doctrines practically resulting in some kind of active worship" (350). Gailyn in *Communicating Christ in Animistic Contexts* notes animism as "the belief that personal spiritual beings and impersonal spiritual forces have power over human affairs and that human beings must discover what forces are influencing them in order to determine future action and frequently to manipulate their power" (20).

Mamang Dai in the section 'a diary of the world' in her short story collection *The Legends of Pensam* narrated various unpleasant happenings that resulted from the curse of the souls as well as the invisible supernatural creatures who are both benevolent and malevolent. The novel starts with the story named "the boy who fell from the sky". It is about Hoxo's arrival into the world- "When Hoxo first opened his eyes to the world, he saw green" (Dai, 16). This green symbolizes Hoxo's innate bond with the nature. His advent into the world is mysterious and it startles the primordial Adis. The land of Adis is shrouded in mystery, and here strange occurrences are frequent. The illiterate, nomadic people who live in-between the hills believe in the existence of spirits and souls. They have countless tales about the same. The writer Dai infuses the spirits extremely authentically in her fictional works, giving them different attributes that creates awe and horror in the Adi community. A water serpent named Birbik appears in the first story, "the boy who fell from the sky." Interestingly, the individual who witnessed it will pass away. Due to this curse, Hoxo's father, Lutor, passed away. Dai in *The Legends of Pensam* says "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, 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 most was the fact that the serpent had head with horns” (17). After this incident the men died due to sickness.

The Adis have a treasure of ancestral indigenous knowledge. They have faith in the supernatural spirits and strength of creatures. These creatures are equal to humans in their eyes. It is evident in the narrative ‘the silence of adela’. In the narrative Togum, Adela's father shoots a python, and the villagers view this as a harmful occurrence. They connect this tragedy to the son of Kepi and Adela's enduring illness. They even planned a series of rituals honouring the snake spirit in order to heal him.

‘That was why’, Hoxo told us, ‘The serpent ritual had to be performed. But sometimes it is a matter of time too.’ He claimed that despite chanting and pleading with the spirits all night to heal the ailing child, they were unsuccessful and that the spirits already had left for an unrememberable location. ‘They are the most dangerous ones, the ones who go away and never return,’ he said (Dai, 31).

Faith is crucial in the Adis spiritual universe. Through the terrible life of the widow Pinyar, Mamang Dai accurately shows Adis belief in numerous bad spirits, as well as associated taboos and ceremonies. who “had been widowed when she was not yet twenty-five” (Dai, 34). The exposition of her tragic life is set up by her intended marriage to Orka, which never materialised, but she became pregnant by him. The unfortunate woman's home was destroyed by fire. The tiger spirit, according to the locals, is to blame for the fire. To appease the tiger spirit, she is exiled from the village and forced to reside on the outside of it throughout the taboo period. Once more, her son ultimately turned out to be the one who killed his son after being apprehended by the spirit of the supernatural being miti-mili. People used to think that it causes the victim to lose consciousness and go crazy. They continue to associate the occurrence with the poisonous tree under which Pinyar's son Kamur was discovered. The unfortunate widow Pinyar believes that her unhappy life is the result of her ancestors' error since they may have neglected to carry out certain ceremonies. Pinyar seeks the help of famous priests to banish the evil spirit in order to live blissfully and freely.

Thus, Dai throughout the novel portrays the close association between invisible spirits and humans. Her representation of nature in the novel is objective If its boundaries are crossed, nature transforms into a living thing that nurtures and protects while also punishing. Through the use of myths and legends through different imagery Mamang Dai asserts that the Adis are conscious regarding ecology and environment from the very beginning of their civilization. In

her novel, nature has a mystical quality, and she seeks to understand nature via the natural world's mysteries. For the people of Arunachal Pradesh and everyone else who lives on this earth, a world without trees, forests, mountains, rivers, birds, animals, forests, and unseen spirits living in the forest would be devoid of any meaning. This understanding is the basis of *The Legends of Pensam*, and it is this knowledge that Dai seeks to expose via her stories, which on the surface appear to be straightforward. Thus, Raujline Siraj Farjina Akhtar notes Dai viewed nature “not only as a passive object, but is also as a dynamic force that plays a pivotal role in shaping an ecological consciousness of the poet as well as the general reader.” (Akhtar 219)

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