RE-PRESENTATION OF HISTORY IN POSTCOLONIAL NARRATIVES: AN ALTERNATIVE DISCOURSE ON MAMANG DAI’S “LEGENDS OF PENSAM

MRS.Y.S. MANJULA¹, DR. GOMATAM. MOHANACHARYULU²

¹Research Scholar, Division of English, Dept. of Sciences and Humanities, VFSTR (Deemed to be University) Vadlamudi, Guntur District A.P.
²Professor of English, Dept. of Sciences and Humanities, VFSTR (Deemed to be University) Vadlamudi, Guntur District A.P

ABSTRACT:
Collision by the Poststructuralist and Post modernist thought of decentring, Postcolonial theory challenged the Universalists claim of literature focusing on colonial experience from the perspective of the colonized at the end of 21st century. Being a theory, it associates with colonial sympathies in the principle and surrogates the colonial metanarratives with counter narratives of resistance and protest by re-presenting history. However, it asserts cultural identities through approaches such as nativism, autonomy, cultural syncretism, hybridity and absorption. Post colonial theory appraises cultural hierarchies supported by an anti essentialist view of identity. The attempt is to recuperate the melodies of the culture that remain entrenched in the collective memory of tribe in spite of repeated attempt of eliminations. Such attempts build substitute discourses to challenge the plots of supremacy insisting narratives of colonial values. In this light of thought, the present paper investigates how Mamang Dai’s “Legends of Pensam” re-finds, re-presents cultural ethos of Adi tribe. The researcher tries to attempt an exploration on the identity of marginalised Adi tribe residing in the Siang Valley of Arunachal Pradesh.

Keywords: Alternative discourse, History, Re-presentation, Narrative, Native culture.

I. INTRODUCTION

Postcolonial studies, in general, insists innovative explorations towards indigenous cultures worldwide and in India, in particular, it shifts from Eurocentricism to strong voices of Indocentric style of subsistence. The attempt is made to re-present and re-cover the roots of cultures with all its originality and subjectivity away from the colonial impressions. Under these circumstances, the counter narratives are increased at every corner of marginalized cultures to destabilize the hegemonic plots insisted by colonialism. In this light the researcher examines the approach in which Mamang Dai’s Legends of Pensam underlines re-presentation of historical and cultural philosophy of Tribal Community.

Mamang Dai is a poet, novelist and freelance reporter. She has worked as correspondent for various dailies like Sentinel, The Telegraph and Hindustan Times. She was the Project Officer in the Biodiversity Hotspots Conservation Programme of the WWF in Arunachal Pradesh. Dai, was conferred the Padmashree in 2011 for Literature and Education. The Legends of Pensam is an intricate web of stories interconnected across a few generations of a family that makes the book more of a novel. There are a host of memorable characters, meticulously interlinked with few major characters like Hoxo, his first friend Rakut, narrator and her friend Mona, who are steeped in traditional tribal beliefs and living vulnerable lives influenced by spirits, shamans and unnatural events. The series of stories incorporated in four sections like ‘a diary of the world’, ‘Song of the rhapsodist’, ‘daughters of the village’ and ‘a matter of time’, relate how the roots of Adi tribes are in the cross roads of negotiating the rapid changes, guarding their animistic faith and strong beliefs of native place during the colonial rule in the late 19th and early 20th century. They are not related just to the location called Pensam, instead they are heart burning elements jumped out of nostalgic mind of the writer.
To understand the novel whether it is a fiction or a fact, meaning of the very title of the book provides the clues. The word pensam means ‘in-between’, the transitory phase between the traditional and modern ways of their life. “In our language, the language of the Adis, the word ‘pensam’ means ‘in-between’. It suggests the middle, or middle ground, but it may also be interpreted as the hidden spaces of the heart where a secret garden grows. It is the small world where anything can happen and everything can be lived; where the narrow boat that we call life sails along somehow in calm or stormy weather; where the life of a man can be measured in the span of a song’.

(Epigraph, vi)

The book is an artistic blend of myth and history of the tribe of Adis of Siang valley. As far as the structure is concerned, it’s neither a short story nor a novel in a strict sense. Davidson ascribes and finds some resemblances or imitations with O.V. Vijayan’s The Legends of Khasak published in 1969 which is an experimentation of the form of the short story and novel in the oral form. Both exploit the modern prose form to bring into light the significance of orality in literature and culture.

The novel is mainly based on the author’s travel notes. The narrator returns along with her friend Mona to Gurdum town, where she lived before. Mona is the proprietor and editor of a glossy magazine called ‘Diary of the World’ and was always looking for “unusual true-life stories”. Mona is of Arab-Greek extraction and her husband Jules, a famous development scientist, is French. Their’s was a “mobile lifestyle” that entailed a lot of travel across countries and continents, and they were on a brief posting in New Delhi at that time. From Gurdum they travelled together to Duyong, “the village of widows”, this was also the ancestral village of the narrator’s mother. The narrator and Mona were welcomed by Hoxo’s family at Duyong, there were his two sons, their wives and their five children. Their house was a warm and happy place full of visitors and friends, brothers, sisters and relatives who came and went at any time. Knowing Mona’s interest in the stories of the village, Hoxo’s mother made her grandson narrate the tragic death of ‘Kalen’ the Hunter.

The novel is majorly a raconteur par excellence; Mamang brings her personal knowledge of the primitive customs and beliefs of her people to recount the many legends that influence the lives of Adis. The author makes a deliberate attempt not only to present the world view of a subverted community as it was in the past but also interlinks and relates the customs and changes in cultural history of a tribe as they transit through an era of nativism, to being colonized by the White people, and consequently entering into the postcolonial era. Mamang is in search of her own roots and she documents these tribal lores, as she admits in a later interview, so that they are preserved and not lost and forgotten in the sweep of modernization. The book can also be praised for its poetic description of nature and certainly a good study of ecocritical reading can also be done.

The novel mainly focuses on history of how the culture and style of Adi tribe of Arunachal Pravesh underwent changes because of Colonial rule in the 19th century. It records mainly three historical events happened at various times which needs to be understood and re-presented in their actual context.

The first historical event recorded is the construction of Stilwell road in 1945. The first time news about the construction was informed by two villagers but the message was not clear. It was said that, “A road was being carved out of the mountainside. Reports reaching the villages said that the migluns were digging a tunnel right across the world [TLP, 38].”

The White people wanted help in this work and a labour corps was being recruited from the various hill tribes. The author describes the uniqueness of the road;

“But in actuality, the railroad was paid for by Indian taxpayers. The British shareholders claimed the investments guaranteed massive returns. The colonizers were only interested in exploiting India's natural resources as they transported items such as coal, iron ore, cotton and other natural resources to ports for the British to ship home to
use in their factories. Thousands of Indian workers died during the construction of the railroads. That’s why the author says that,

“no other road in the world had taken as high a toll of human lives as this one; it had been dubbed ‘a-man-a-mile road [40].’”

Though it was not through violence, as it happened in many parts of the country then, the recruitment process was highly strategic. Apart from Dai’s recalling the very core of Adi identity as a way of life, a way of being, and a world view which and which is now threatened by the onslaught of convenience and development. As an insider she tries to go back to her roots and retrieve the cultural ethos of a community so that they are not lost in the onslaught of modernization and globalization. Colonization involves an institutionalized effort to encourage the natives to embrace and imbibe their point of view in order to justify their actions. Under the circumstances, it becomes imperative for a marginalized community to subdue themselves and accept their views at the cost of their forced amnesia. Dai’s stories record and register the advent and occupation of her native land by the colonial forces.

“The men recruited from the hills were given rations and bedding but the work was the work of the devil. Those who went and returned said the forest and the skies were like nothing they had seen before…….In the swampy valleys men died like flies, shivering with fever and fear. Sometimes, a mignun died too, wheezing and panting as he struggled like an animal possessed through the foetid mud” (39)

Though the colonies are originally formed for trade, the war is inevitable and they build their trade centers on the sea shores, they extend into the highlands and plains. From initiation of grabbing land to the fine construction of the conveyances, the colonizer’s have their own strategies. A colonizer justifies acquiring land for little to no payment by stating that, “The Indians made no use of it,” he asserts, “but for Hunting.”[Report, NHCRT].The colonizers initially make believe that the project is mutually but in course of time they extend their dominion . Some strategies include the establishment of modernizationist projects, such as the construction of elaborate transportation and information infrastructures, the introduction of private property in land, specific forms of taxation, and colonial law with the purpose of enabling the extractive and disciplinary apparatus of the colonial administration. The ‘Divide & Rule’ Policy is clearly seen in the episode of the recruiting the villagers for the construction work.[Aziz Rehaman, et al.2.] The village elders were so convinced that they persuade able bodied men from our villages to join the work force, ’ the elders were brainwashed and so that they somehow forced young people join the project work. Otherwise they could not force their own people to join the dreadful work and die as worms.

The Adi people are strongly independent and their only natural resource is forest. They ascribe it the stature of a deity as their lives are closely connected to the forest ecology. Respect for nature is assimilated in the Adi culture and therefore the expressions pressed in episode reveal the systematic degradation of the forest ecology by the modernizing. That’s why they are neither in want of colonizers wages not ready to see destroy their land in front of their own eyes. People reaction for the recruitment is narrated,

“Hoxo’s father had initially opposed the recruitment and most people were on his side. Resentment had flared up against Rakut’s father, who, as the local interpreter for the British sahibs, had been instructed that at least three men from his village be sent to work on the road. However , in the end both the men had gone off together to represent their village, which even at that time had fewer young men than women. They were gone for three years [40].”

Land dispossession and subjugation by British and zamindar interests resulted in a number of Adivasi revolts in the late eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries, [Paramjit S.37] Although these were suppressed ruthlessly by the governing British authority, partial restoration of privileges to Adivasis elites and some leniency in tax burdens resulted in relative calm, despite continuing and widespread dispossession, from the late nineteenth century onwards.[Wiliam,89] The economic deprivation, in some cases, triggered internal Adivasis migrations within India that would continue for another century.

Many times these migrated tribes either settle down in foreign land or with lot of ethos and pathos long to see their own land and meet their own people which remain an eternal dream and background for many literary
works. Fortunately, the people went for the work in the novel are only three and they successfully returned. Dai narrates,

“When they returned, Rakut’s father was wearing hunting boots and a camouflage outfit. The first thing he did on entering the village was to salute and smiling broadly, shout’s ‘A! B! C!’ it was a happy day and the villagers turned out in a swarm to welcome them home. There was also great excitement about the baby in the basket, but Hoxo’s father said nothing. When the villagers asked Rakut’ father, he only said, ‘it is a child. There was great noise and fire in the sky and then our son fell to earth [41].’”

Mamang Dai silently whispers the ‘struggle for existence’ of marginalized Adi tribe and carefully explicates the history and traces the hidden places and stories of her home. In doing so, she has appropriately utilized the local Miris, the Rhapsodist to narrate the realistic descriptions of struggles and challenges through ritual lyrics and Ponung dance performances. It is the task of shamans, rhapsodists and the Ponung dancers to guard, preserve and pass the script less, oral history of traditions and culture to the future generations. Their narrations of their past is reinforced in the text as: “The dancers sigh and wipe their eyes. The fire burns brightly and the shaman is a shadow man leaping up larger than life. He has sung of the beginning of the world; of the sword of five metals that ignited the bonfire 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 the house by the river. These are the stories, rhapsodies of time and destiny, that he must guard [55].”

In any colonized country, in the early decades of 20th century it is observed that to regain the fractured cultural identity, incessant conflicts prevailed between the original inhabitants of the land and the colonial power that tried to control and exploit the resources within. It has always been a part of colonization that, in the fight of development the local men were oppressed, exploited and turned into labour. The existing social inequalities are manipulatively exploited by the West and the hill men were dragged into bondage that created further vacuum within the different clans and their communities. Despite all these, Adi tribes inhabiting the east, west and upper Siang districts of the state were brave enough fighting for their rights to survive.

Mamang Dai records their skepticism towards the Whites, in the section ‘travel the road’. The local Miri at Komisang re-presented the historical incident of the assassination of Captain Noel Williamson, a Medical officer Dr. Gregorson, forty seven daily workers and a few soldiers in 1911. They set out on a mission with good intentions, to map the wilderness and explore the course of river Siang, flowing through the territory of Adis, but the officer was brutally killed due to misconceptions and the allegations like the officer would bring troops to destroy their villages and he might had roman [58] which demands ‘terrible punishment in retaliation [48].” All these reasons seems mere conjectures, what is certain is, an angry Adi who was insulted by the white man followed him to Komisang and struck him down with the support of the kinsmen of his tribe. It is evident that the colonizers try to conquer the local hill men with gifts, but Adis who were known as ‘Abor’ in the past, meaning ‘unruly’ or ‘disobedient’, are stubborn, they were neither afraid of migluns nor guns and loud voices. Dai chronicles the harsh reality that people encounter in their own homeland as:

“A white man had been killed. A saheb who had come to village bearing gifts.......everyone knew it was the fault of the cowardly men who accompanied the officer. They had laughed in the face of poor villager and said that he was a wild beast eaten up with the disease who could never receive the attention or sympathy of the white officer. Why should anybody insult a man who was not looking for sympathy? Why should anybody look at a man with the disgust when he was a man of the land and the other visitor trying to conquer the villages with lies and bags of gifts? Why should anybody who had spat on a man’s face live? [51].”

Irrespective of the reasons behind the massacre, the voiceless tribes were overpowered by the hegemony of the rulers. It would be a herculean task for the hill men to fight for justice due to communication gap. The subalterns couldn’t raise their voices, as Gayathri Spivak in her essay Can the Subalterns speak?, rightly points out that even if the subalterns speak, no one is there to listen and there is no political agency to support them.

“The news of massacre sent shock waves across the county and resulted in punitive expedition of 1912, became known as the Abor Expeditionary Field Force [48].”
All the culprits behind the incident were captured and taken away in chains to Andaman Island jail. The men of the village were forced to surrender with their arms in peace. ‘Surrender is a kind of Peace’[53]. Under the vigilance of armed soldiers, the helpless villagers carried stones to raise a tall cairn, in memory of the white sahib. That memorial stone tablet is still respected in Komsing.

In Beginning Theory, Barry sums up the views of Fanon as: “The first step for colonialized people in finding a voice and an identity is to reclaim their own past. For centuries the European colonizing power will have devalued the nation’s past, seeing its pre-colonial era as a pre-civilized limbo, or even as a historical void.

“Accompanied by Dr Gregorson (sic), Medical Officer of European and Native Staff of tea gardens in Upper Assam, a company of 47 porters and armed escort, Williamson left Pasighat on 20 March 1911. At ferry point of Komlighat a friendly courier of one of the headmen of Kebang village Takut tried to dissuade him, as there was a conspiracy to stall the move. But Williamson brushed him aside and crossed the river and arrived at Sissan village. At Sissan a number of porters fell sick forcing Dr Gregorson to stay back while Williamson marched ahead to Komsing. On 29 th March, accompanied by an interpreter, three sick porters left for Rotung en route to Pasighat. The interpreter was carrying three official envelopes for delivery to post at Pasighat. He flourished these envelopes to the curious villagers in a show of great importance. The envelopes were bordered with black stripes as a mark of mourning for the death of King Edward VII of the British Empire. But the foolish interpreter boastfully explained that white indicates two sahibs, the black borderline countless sepoys and the red seal was of great anger. He further told the frightened villagers that his move to Pasighat was to deliver the letters to call the army to level the hills by bombardment. Greatly alarmed, the leaders decided to stop the delivery of the letters. Fast runners moved to Kebang, the leading village and relayed the ominous message. Next morning when the interpreter and his companions moved out in great self-assurance they were waylaid and brutally murdered. The people then mobilized for an offensive attack. Stockades were built up, needle-sharp panjies laid on the route of march, stone chutes with immense piles of boulders concealed on the path, strung arrows held in tension of string to fly at all directions, patrols moved out to watch towers, an elaborate signal system operated, food packets cached for emergency. Padhi Abors murdered the members of the expedition at village Komsing. The Government of India took it as an affront to the imperial prestige. An impressive expedition under Major General Bower was sent to teach a lesson to the offending Abors” (Pasighat.wordpress.com)

Commenting on the killings, Dai opines that it is the destiny of the men which was written long before. Dai describes it as:

“The killing happened here, but the killers were from another village. But they were of our tribe. Yes, perhaps the white man was a good man; perhaps he would have been

Welcome in the village but destiny was written long before he came to these hills, just as destiny was written for the man who struck the first blow. He was captured and taken away in chains to the Island prison across the black waters. Two men like an exchange of souls; one was surrendered by the brooding mountains, and the other by the restless sea [54].”

Another historical incident narrated that needs to be re-presented in the novel is the tragic earth quake and its involved pathos. It’s an indisputable truth that the life of Adis is a gift from Mother Nature; their history is an amalgamation with the history of nature. Love and respect towards nature is ingrained, and reciprocal. In her work, Arunachal Pradesh: The Hidden Land, Dai mentions, “The tribes of Arunachal Pradesh have always lived of the forest without posing any threat to the ecosystem [The Hidden Land, 28].

Their practices, their animistic faith, their belief in malevolent and benevolent spirits, the supernatural elements etc., are inseparable with nature. One may visualize this bondage from the story of Nenem and her relationship with the river, in the section ‘rites of love’. Nenem was the only daughter of a village headman. Apparently it was believed that Nenem was a gift from the mythical land and the blessing of the spirit of their celestial aunt. She hated to attend the mission school, leaving behind the mountains and river breeze. Nenem’s attachment with her village is known from the following lines:

“All she wanted was freedom, she later told her friends. The thing she had been most frightened of in school was that her soul might shrink, or be altered forever, and that she might never see the river again [ 96].”
Since the Abor expedition of 1912 after the Komsing incident the whole of the Siang valley had been brought under the control of British administrative. During that time David, a young British administrative officer posted in the region, was attracted towards the legendary beauty, Nenem. An enigmatic romance blossomed between the tribal girl and the miglun, an unheard of occurrence in those days. However, when David was transferred to some other place and wanted to take Nenem with him, she refused to go, as she was unable to let go of her roots-her land, her river and her people. After some years, Nenem got married to Kao ceremoniously distinguished by the presence of Hoxo’s father, Lutor. Nenem crossed the river to Kao’s village which is on the other side. Together they raised a family, guarded their land and lived among their people observing the ancient customs of their clan. Young Nenem wounded in love was healed by this marriage. An undying image of David slowly vanished and replaced with expectations of new love. It was after the birth of baby daughter, Losi, Nenem became really close to Kao.

Nature blesses and curses as well. Their faith in nature was faded away by modernisation, deforestation, and commercial greed, resulting in ecological imbalance. Nenem’s harmonious married life was disturbed by a natural calamity. On 15 August 1950, the earth opened up and hills were swallowed by a major earthquake measuring 8.6 on the Richter scale. The river that Nenem loved so much thrown off its course, spread like the sea, and swallowed half of their village. She was shocked and saddened by the cruelty of nature. She could not tolerate the pain-the ruins of the devastated village, the changes in land form, and the helpless condition of the villagers. Grief stricken, Nenem breathed her last silently without a trace of illness, on a rock in the water bed, in serene environment. The whole village mourned her death. Though Hoxo had never seen her, for him, Nenem was the soul of their land, like the river. The natural calamity absorbed Nenem’s life leaving behind devastation.

Beyond all literary theories and political intrigues, the love episode between David and Nenem can be understood as a wonderful portrayal of human emotions that surpass time and history. Although, the relation between Nenem and David was unwanted and unacceptable according to the custom, the novel, as true reflection of human reality, establishes a strong dictum of need for the human dependency beyond the barriers of race and region. David as an administrative officer did not coerce Nenem to take along with him but allowed her to live in her dream world of love. David was the soul of this land, her river and her people. After some years, Nenem got married to Kao ceremoniously distinguished by the presence of Hoxo’s father, Lutor. Nenem crossed the river to Kao’s village which is on the other side. Together they raised a family, guarded their land and lived among their people observing the ancient customs of their clan. Young Nenem wounded in love was healed by this marriage. An undying image of David slowly vanished and replaced with expectations of new love. It was after the birth of baby daughter, Losi, Nenem became really close to Kao.

While expounding the beauty and philosophy behind the novel, Bhattacherjee states that Mamang Dai’s Legends of Pensam is ‘a valiant attempt to discover the secrets of lost place’ and India would be much more colourful, if it were known that the country need not depend on the Aryan thesis at all and that people in this land produced knowledge and truth [35].”

II. CONCLUSION

Mamang Dai’s Legends of Pensam makes a conscious effort not only to present the world view of a marginalized tribe as it was in the past but also connects and relates the traditions and changes in cultural history of a people as they pass through a period of nativism, to being colonized by the British, and eventually stepping into the postcolonial era. The stories in the text mark continuity between the distant past, the immediate past to the present do not happen due to cultural amnesia effected by colonialism. By attempting a fresh and authentic representation of one’s culture, Dai’s stories provide a postcolonial perspective while trying to avoid looking at one’s past through the prism of a colonial hangover. The author neither exalts the Adi culture nor does she deprecates it as inferior in comparison to a dominant culture. Dai’s narratives thus recall a past through the maze of the lore and myths that lived in the memory of the people. It is an attempt to retrieve and re-present the culture of a community which may have been otherwise silenced at the altar of progress.

REFERENCES

6. 5 Ways the British Empire Ruthlessly Exploited India, https://www.telesurenglish.net/news/5-Ways-the-British-Empire-Ruthlessly-Exploited-India-20170425-0033.html