



The Moral Landscape of Nature in Mamang Dai's *The Legends of Pensam*

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ABSTRACT

This paper explores the intricate interrelationship between nature and indigenous life as depicted in Mamang Dai's *The Legends of Pensam*. Set against the verdant landscape of Arunachal Pradesh, the novel captures the Adi community's perception of nature as a sentient and spiritual force that defines their cultural identity, moral order and worldview. Moving beyond conventional environmental narratives, Dai's text presents nature not as a passive background but as an active participant in the cycles of human existence. Drawing upon the theoretical frameworks of Arne Naess' *Deep Ecology* and Graham Huggan and Helen Tiffin's *Postcolonial Ecocriticism*, this study situates Dai's work at the intersection of ecological philosophy and postcolonial resistance. Through close textual analysis, the research reveals how Dai's narrative voice dissolves the binaries between the real and the supernatural, crafting a liminal space where human; spiritual land natural realms coexist in fluid continuity. The paper further examines how the colonial intrusion, exemplified through the construction of the Stilwell Road, disrupts this ecological balance, exposing the violence inherent in anthropocentric and imperial pursuits. Yet, Dai refrains from overt political commentary, instead offering a poetic reaffirmation of indigenous resilience and ecological wisdom. Her portrayal of myths, oral traditions and animistic beliefs foregrounds an alternative

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epistemology where the environment is revered as both provider and destroyer, sacred and sentient. In doing so, Dai's work reclaims the indigenous understanding of ecology as a living, moral continuum rather than a resource for exploitation. Ultimately, this study argues that *The Legends of Pensam* contributes to a decolonial reimagining of environmental ethics. Through its lyrical narrative and spiritual sensibility, the novel calls for an ecological consciousness rooted in coexistence, reciprocity and reverence-principles that remain crucial to both indigenous survival and global ecological discourse.

Introduction

It is well known that Northeast India possesses one of the most captivating and panoramic landscapes in the country. Writers from this region have eloquently depicted its splendour and vitality in their works. The land, adorned with hills and mountains, intersected by deep valleys and lush forests, forms a world enveloped in verdant beauty. Yet, behind this scenic landscape lie histories, untold stories, myths and oral traditions intricately intertwined with nature itself. For the communities inhabiting this region, nature cannot be dismissed as a mere backdrop or passive setting; it is an inseparable part of their existence. Mamang Dai, a distinguished writer from Arunachal Pradesh and a member of the Adi tribe, has vividly captured this symbiotic relationship between humanity and nature in her novel *The Legends of Pensam*. According to Dai, *Pensam* means “in-between,” suggesting that in this middle ground “anything can happen and anything can be lived” (Dai vii). The narratives in her book thus transcend the boundaries of the real and the supernatural, reflecting the complexity and fluidity of indigenous life and belief.

Arunachal Pradesh, one of India's greenest states, ranks second in terms of forest cover. Its vast natural wealth is accompanied by immense cultural diversity and a repository of oral histories that remain largely unexplored. Through her reflective journey to her ancestral land, Dai introduces readers to the Adi's way of life, illuminating their intimate and reciprocal relationship with nature. For the Adi community, nature functions as a provider, a destroyer, a sacred presence and a spiritual force that governs their moral, cultural and social existence. Their traditions, beliefs and identity are deeply rooted in the environment they inhabit.

Objectives

- a) To explore the Adi tribe's interconnectedness with nature.
- b) To analyse Dai's portrayal of indigenous ecological ethics.



- c) To examine the integration of oral traditions, myths and animistic beliefs.
- d) To examine the impact of colonial and modern interventions on the socio-cultural, political and economic life of the Adi community.

Review of Literature

George Sessions' *"The Deep Ecology Movement: A Review"* (1987) provides a comprehensive examination of the intellectual evolution of ecological thought from scientific inquiry to philosophical worldview. He argues that the rise of ecology in the 1960s initiated a profound epistemological and ethical shift that challenged the anthropocentric assumptions embedded in Western philosophy and religion. Drawing on figures such as Aldo Leopold, Rachel Carson and Lynn White Jr., Sessions traces how environmental thought matured into a critique of modernity's metaphysical foundations. Rachel Carson's *Silent Spring* (1962) marked the emergence of ecological consciousness by exposing the destructive consequences of human technological domination. Her challenge to the ideology of "controlling nature" initiated the moral reorientation later developed in Leopold's *A Sand County Almanac* (1949), which proposed a "land ethic" recognizing the intrinsic value of non-human life. Sessions situates these works as precursors to the deep ecological critique that rejects instrumental attitudes toward nature. Lynn White Jr.'s *"The Historical Roots of Our Ecologic Crisis"* (1967) advanced this critique by identifying Christian anthropocentrism as a primary source of ecological degradation. His call for a return to the egalitarian ethos of St. Francis of Assisi provoked wide theological reassessment, giving rise to ecological interpretations of stewardship and the theology of creation (Sessions 112). Clarence Glacken further reinforced White's analysis by demonstrating how early modern science, particularly Baconian and Cartesian thought extended this anthropocentric logic through the mechanistic domination of nature. Sessions also notes the incorporation of non-Western and Indigenous perspectives into ecological discourse. Some thinkers such as Raymond Dasmann and Paul Shepard drew upon Zen Buddhism, Hinduism and Taoism to articulate an ecocentric worldview that dissolves the human–nature dualism. Shepard's description of ecology as a "subversive science" encapsulates the movement's radical challenge to industrial civilization and its anthropocentric ideology. In synthesis, Sessions' review delineates the deep ecology movement as an intellectual convergence of ecological science, spiritual philosophy and moral critique. It calls for a paradigmatic shift from human-centred utilitarianism to an ecocentric ethic grounded in the intrinsic worth and interdependence of all life forms.

In *Ecocritical Perspectives in Mamang Dai's The Legends of Pensam: Bridging Indigenous Knowledge and Environmental Consciousness*, K.C. Monica and Dr. Amar Kumar Nayak examine the Adi community's



relationship with nature through an ecocritical lens. The study highlights how Dai's novel portrays the interconnectedness of human and non-human life, situating indigenous ecological consciousness within cultural memory, spiritual practice and everyday experience. Monica and Nayak emphasize that the narrative aligns with ecocritical principles, including the "more-than-human world" and biocentrism, critiquing anthropocentric approaches to the environment. The authors note that Dai also addresses the Anthropocene and modern intrusions, illustrating ecological degradation, plastic pollution and cultural dissonance, while simultaneously portraying nature's resilience and resistance, reflecting Nixon's concept of "slow violence." The study concludes that Dai's lyrical depiction of Pensam fosters a model of sustainability rooted in indigenous knowledge, showing that ecological ethics are inseparable from cultural identity, folklore and lived experience.

In *Environmentalism and Ecocriticism*, Richard Kerridge outlines the historical and theoretical evolution of environmental thought, tracing its emergence as a response to industrial modernity and ecological degradation. He situates environmentalism as both a critique and a product of modernity, emphasizing its reliance on scientific observation, technological mediation and global communication networks. Drawing upon Rachel Carson's *Silent Spring* (1962), Kerridge underscores how environmental consciousness arose from concerns over industrial pollution, deforestation and climate change, framing it as a global and interdisciplinary movement. Kerridge identifies a central challenge within environmentalism: the cultural difficulty of representing slow, invisible or deferred ecological crises, as articulated by Barbara Adam in *Timescapes of Modernity* (1998). He argues that ecocriticism's role is to invent new literary and aesthetic forms capable of rendering environmental harm visible and ethically significant. By engaging concepts such as *ecology*, *ecosystem* and *food chain*, Kerridge establishes a bridge between scientific and cultural discourses, linking ecological interdependence with literary representation. Further, he distinguishes between *anthropocentrism* and *ecocentrism*, aligning with Lawrence Buell's criteria for environmentally oriented texts, where the nonhuman environment assumes narrative presence and ethical importance. Kerridge's discussion extends to deep ecology and social ecology, illustrating how both philosophies challenge human dominance and advocate biocentric ethics. His work thus frames ecocriticism as both an analytical and activist discipline, committed to reimagining the relationship between literatures, culture and the natural world.

The Lioness Defending Her Clan in the North East: A Study of Ecospiritual Elements in Mamang Dai's Fiction by Satapathy and Nayak explore *ecospirituality* as a central framework for understanding Mamang Dai's fictional works. They define ecospirituality as the spiritual evolution of an individual through an awareness of and response to ecological stimuli. Drawing on critical theories from thinkers like



Bron Taylor, Rosemary Radford Ruether and Pramod K. Nayar, the authors position Dai's fiction within the wider global discourse of deep ecology, ecofeminism and indigenous environmentalism. The review emphasizes that spirituality, in Dai's world, transcends organized religion, functioning instead as a quest for self-realization through communion with nature. The article highlights how Dai's works from *The Sky Queen* and *Once Upon a Moontime* to *The Legends of Pensam*, *Stupid Cupid* and *The Black Hill* integrate tribal folklore, myths and rituals to depict a worldview where human life is inseparable from ecological systems. Through folklore, Dai reconstructs indigenous cosmologies that treat nature as both sacred and moral instructor, reflecting Bron Taylor's idea of "earth-based spirituality." In *The Legends of Pensam*, ecospiritual awareness is expressed through the Adi tribe's animistic faith rooted in coexistence with the forest ecology. *Stupid Cupid* contrasts urban materialism with the protagonist's spiritual regeneration through a return to her native hills, while *The Black Hill* represents ultimate spiritual union between human and landscape.

The review also situates Dai's fiction within the continuum of ethnographic and literary traditions of Northeast India, referencing Verrier Elwin's anthropological insights. The authors argue that Dai's recurring motifs of rivers, hills and spirits symbolize the dynamic interaction between ecology and spirituality, asserting the role of landscape as both cultural and divine entity. Satapathy and Nayak conclude that Dai's treatment of ecospiritualism invites a broader rethinking of human–nature relations in literature. They call for future studies to expand beyond Dai's local ecological imagination toward a more global ecospiritual framework, linking tribal narratives to universal ecological ethics.

Pankaj Gogoi, Popi Kalita and Dipankar Satola's *Animating the Sacred: Mythic Ecologies and Indigenous Cosmology in Mamang Dai's The Legends of Pensam, River Poems and The Black Hill*, investigate the convergence of myth, ecology and indigenous spirituality in Mamang Dai's literary corpus, focusing on *The Legends of Pensam*, *River Poems* and *The Black Hill*. The authors foreground Dai's representation of the sacred as an animate, living force that mediates human–nature relationships within the cosmology of Northeast India. They situate her work within the framework of *ecocriticism* and *indigenous environmental philosophy*, emphasizing how Dai's mythic narratives articulate a distinctly tribal understanding of ecology as a spiritual continuum rather than a separate material reality.

The literature review draws upon key critical perspectives in ecocritical and indigenous studies. It references Bron Taylor's concept of "dark green religion," which associates nature with sacred vitality and Graham Harvey's *animism theory*, which redefines the sacred as relational and dialogic rather than hierarchical. The study also cites Deep Ecology theorists such as Arne Naess, aligning Dai's narratives with



a holistic worldview that regards all beings as intrinsically valuable. Scholars like Pramod K. Nayar and Ursula Heise are also invoked to position Dai's writing within global eco-literary discourses that bridge ecology, culture and spirituality. Through close readings of Dai's texts, the authors demonstrate how mythic imagination, landscape and oral storytelling fuse to form what they call *mythic ecologies*—symbolic spaces where rivers, mountains and spirits coexist with human life as moral and spiritual entities. In *The Legends of Pensam*, the intertwining of tribal legends and shamanic visions reveals an indigenous ontology rooted in interconnectedness. *River Poems* extends this ecospiritual consciousness by portraying rivers as sentient beings embodying memory and continuity, while *The Black Hill* rearticulates the sacred landscape as a site of suffering, resistance and transcendence.

The article situates Dai's vision within broader conversations about postcolonial environmentalism and indigenous resilience, noting how her narratives resist the Western separation of nature and culture. Her writing instead restores the *animistic perception* of the world as inhabited by living presences, echoing the Adi community's belief in ecological interdependence. Gogoi, Kalita and Satola underscore Dai's contribution to expanding Indian ecocritical discourse through her *mythopoetic ecology*, which integrates folklore, environmental ethics and spiritual insight. Their review affirms that Dai's work not only preserves indigenous cosmology but also redefines ecological thought as an act of cultural remembrance and sacred animation.

Methodology

As a work of literary research, this study adopts a qualitative research approach. A close textual analysis of Mamang Dai's *The Legends of Pensam* forms the core of this research. The study draws upon Arne Naess' *Deep Ecology Movement*, which emphasizes the intrinsic value and interdependence of all life forms and Graham Huggan and Helen Tiffin's *Postcolonial Ecocriticism*, which interrogates the intersection of ecological degradation and colonial domination. Naess' non-anthropocentric ethic illuminates the Adi community's spiritual ecology, while Huggan and Tiffin's postcolonial framework situates Dai's narrative within the larger discourse of environmental justice and cultural resistance. Together, these critical paradigms situate Dai's narrative within broader discourses of environmental ethics, cultural resilience and decolonial ecological thought. This theoretical synthesis enables a nuanced interpretation of *The Legends of Pensam* as a site where indigenous ecological consciousness and postcolonial critique converge.



The Multiplicity of Nature's role in *The Legends of Pensam*

Upon close examination of *The Legends of Pensam*, it becomes evident that Mamang Dai has written the text as an act of homage to her homeland. The novel expresses her deep emotional and spiritual connection with the land she comes from, almost as though her life is intertwined with the spirits that dwell there. The work also serves as an act of atonement for having moved away from her roots and an attempt to recover the lost intimacy with her place of origin. Dai's purpose seems to lie in the celebration and preservation of her community's oral traditions, myths and cosmologies. This sentiment is clearly reflected in her words: "I remember the year I came back to live in the village after my mother died. It was an act of penance for having moved too far away from her" (Dai 76). Through her narrative, Dai transports the readers into a world where dreams and reality intertwine and the realms of the natural and supernatural overlap. She writes, "Perhaps it was the spirit of the place, I don't know, but every time I came back I noticed that the village had this quality of absorbing visitors into forgotten newness of things" (Dai 37). Her storytelling thus unfolds within a liminal space where human life and natural forces coexist in fluid harmony. With a lyrical voice that merges realism with myth, Dai constructs a world that reflects both the tangible and the transcendent.

The Adi community, like many indigenous groups, follows an animistic belief system in which nature is regarded as sacred, sentient and inseparable from human existence. Their livelihood depends on hunting, gathering and cultivation, practices carried out with reverence and awareness of nature's power. Their relationship with the environment is reciprocal: they take from nature, yet they also give back through rituals and observances that honour it. Anthropocentrism, in the strict Western sense, cannot be easily applied to their worldview, for they perceive nature as both nurturing and potentially destructive. Their resistance to colonial exploitation, especially during the construction of the Stilwell Road, stems from their moral and spiritual obligation to protect the sanctity of their land.

Dai's portrayal of the Stilwell Road construction during the Second World War exposes the violent intrusion of colonial and military forces into the indigenous ecological space. Under the supervision of American General Joseph Warren Stilwell, the project entailed immense human and environmental cost. It was an act of cruelty both upon men and upon nature: "the thunder of cargo trucks and bulldozers, the shouts of men and how the jungle burst into flame as the mountain tops were blown off and the labour forced struggled to claw their way through the rubble and drag the wretched road across the mutilated hills" (Dai 40). Mountains were blasted, tunnels carved and elephants exploited beyond endurance, as Dai describes them "The elephants strained and quivered to the shouts of their mahouts, slipped, struggled,



knelt, struggled on and many of the poor animals lost their footing and hurtled off the mountainside bellowing like mythical beasts with their eyes rolled up skywards. It was unimaginable, what the migluns were trying to achieve” (Dai 39). Men from the hills were recruited to do “the work of the devil” in exchange for rations and bedding. The tragedy of this undertaking parallels Joseph Conrad’s *Heart of Darkness*, where progress is pursued at the expense of both human and natural life. Dai makes this devastation explicit through the rhapsodist’s words: “Before the assault on the hill...Sometimes they had needed dynamite to clear the way. What world was this, why was he here?” (Dai 53). Likewise, Hoxo laments, “There are no villages. It is a no man’s land and the only people living there now are the men with guns” (Dai 41).

The intrusion did not only bring destruction to human lives and the environment but also disturbed the spiritual equilibrium of the jungle. According to Adi belief, “the big trees were brought down. The spirits of our ancestors who dwelt in these high and secret places fell with the trees. They were homeless and so they went away. And everything had changed since then” (Dai 42). This act of violence may rightly be termed a rape of ecology, for nothing was left untouched by exploitation. The intervention also altered indigenous practices, provoking a gradual shift towards anthropocentrism. As Dai has observe, “Ever since the arrival of firearms into these hills, hunting had become a passion” (Dai 10). The excessive use of weapons not only endangered, lives but also eroded the community’s moral reverence for nature. “We need courage and faith in the face of change. That is all we can do” (Dai 43), says Hoxo, encapsulating the people’s struggle to adapt amid moral and ecological disarray.

Equally significant is Dai’s portrayal of the Adis’ complex relationship with the unseen world of spirits and supernatural beings. The villagers’ belief in entities such as Bribik, the water serpent, or *miti-mili*, a mysterious forest force, reflects their understanding of nature as animate and powerful. Unexplained deaths or illnesses are often attributed to these spirits and rituals are performed to appease or protect against them. As Hoxo remarks, “Some things are beyond recall and such things happen all the time. It is better to be ready” (Dai 19). These beliefs affirm that for the Adis, nature governs moral and spiritual order as much as it sustains material life. The widow Pinyar’s assertion, “Faith is everything” (Dai 35), underscores their enduring trust in the metaphysical dimensions of the environment.

Dai’s narrative humanises nature, granting it agency and emotional resonance. Nature is not a passive backdrop but a living, sentient presence that breathes, reacts and responds to human actions. Aldo Leopold described ecology as “the outstanding discovery of the twentieth century,” yet Dai’s work reveals that indigenous cultures have long recognised this interdependence. Her storytelling invites readers to reconsider



the boundaries between the human and the non-human. The forest is described as “The forest is like an animal. It breathes all around us and we never know when it will suddenly rise up like a green snake out of the decaying vegetation or descend on us like a mantle of bats reeking of blood and venom” (Dai 52), becomes a metaphor for the vitality and consciousness of the natural world.

The Legends of Pensam thus transcends ethnographic documentation to become a profound meditation on coexistence and ecological ethics. Dai’s work affirms that harmony between humanity and nature is achievable only through mutual respect and restraint. When human greed disrupts this equilibrium, destruction inevitably follows. Through her lyrical narrative, Dai not only preserves the memory and culture of her people but also situates indigenous ecological wisdom within the broader global discourse of environmental consciousness. Her vision redefines the relationship between human and nature as one of coexistence rather than control, presenting an ecocritical insight that is both spiritual and sustainable.

Conclusion

Mamang Dai’s *The Legends of Pensam* stands as a profound testament to the interdependence between humans and the natural world within indigenous consciousness. Through her lyrical blending of myth, memory and history, Dai portrays nature as a living moral and spiritual entity that shapes human destiny. The Adi community’s worldview rooted in reverence, reciprocity and restraint contrasts sharply with the exploitative impulses of colonial modernity. By juxtaposing the Adis’ harmonious coexistence with the devastation of the Stilwell Road construction, Dai exposes the ethical rupture caused by external domination and ecological violence. Her narrative bridges ecological and postcolonial perspectives, situating environmental destruction within broader histories of cultural displacement. *The Legends of Pensam* calls for an ecological reawakening grounded in indigenous wisdom, one that recognises nature’s sacredness and the shared responsibility of coexistence.

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