

Between Transcendence and Immanence: A Liminal Representation of Mamang Dai's *The Legends of Pensam*

Aninnya Sarkar

PhD Scholar

Amity School of Languages

Amity University Chhattisgarh, India

Orcid ID: **0009-0006-6031-306X**

Indrani Singh Rai

Professor

Amity School of Languages

Amity University Chhattisgarh, India

Orcid ID: **0000-0002-0962-9521**

Abstract

Itanagar-based author Mamang Dai attempts to highlight the cultural liminal consciousness of her motherland, which is situated in a conflicting zone between Tibet and India. The state commonly known as 'The Land of the Dawn Lit Mountains' is a hub of twenty-six indigenous tribes and one hundred and ten sub-clans, who are sustaining their lives based on the natural resources and geographical benefits gifted to them by their Almighty Donyi Polo. *The Legends of Pensam* published in 2006, is a book that mainly captures the daily life practices and cultural performances of the Adi tribes, who are struggling with their presence between tradition and modernity, myth and reality, and between the Duyang villages and Pigo town. But while crossing through these passages from tradition to modernity, the cultural transitions that these aboriginal societies overcame in the process, completely promoted them to the stage of transformation. Thus, this paper is an attempt to seize the cultural transitions and transformations that are traced in the Adi tribal characters of Dai's novel, *The Legends of Pensam*.

Keywords: *Adi tribes, The Legends of Pensam, Mamang Dai, Arunachal Pradesh, Liminality*



This article is licensed under a Creative Commons Attribution-Non Commercial 4.0 (CC BY-NC 4.0) International License. <https://creativecommons.org/licenses/by-nc/4.0/>

Introduction:

Mamang Dai was born on February 23, 1957 in Pasighat, in the East Siang district of, Itanagar, Arunachal Pradesh. She belongs to the Adi tribal community in the state, which is home to twenty tribes and one hundred and ten sub-clans. As part of the seven states of the Northeast India, Arunachal is said as “one of the largest states of the country, and also one of its greenest”, (Dai, *Legends* xi) which is receiving the first sun rays in the whole nation and famously known as ‘Land of the Dawn Lit Mountains’. The entire territory of Arunachal was earlier known as the North East Frontier Agency, but in 1972, Arunachal Pradesh became a union territory and later in 1987, it was declared a free and individualized state. The state is “83,743 sq km. in an area stretching eastwards from Bhutan in the west to the Patkoi Hills that form India’s boundary with Myanmar. To the north and north-east, the state marks the last frontier of the country with 1,080 km long international boundary with China...” (Dai, “Oral Narratives” 1) Dai’s words on her Alma Mater frame a clear picture of the borderland consciousness and space formation that she tries to portray through her novel *The Legends of Pensam*.

Mamang Dai is a former civil servant of her state but she quits the IAS job to place her contribution to the field of media and communication, working in many famous newspapers of the country like *The Telegraph*, *Hindustan Times* and so on. But later she chooses her identity to be demarcated as a litterateur, writing about the cultures, traditions, and philosophical beliefs of her tribal communities and her tribal clans. Dai even worked as an officer at the World Wide Fund for Nature, in the Eastern Himalayas Biodiversity Hotspots Programme. She achieved the prestigious Padma Shri Award in 2011 from the Government of India, the Verrier Elwin Award from the State Government of Arunachal in 2003 and the Sahitya Akademi Award for her novel *The Black Hill* in 2017. Dai expresses her deep concern and dissatisfaction with the progress and development that has touched her land in the wake of modernization in her another non-fiction work *Arunachal Pradesh The Hidden Land*, “Today change has come like a steam roller. The transition from the unknown frontier to modern state has been sharp and rapid and the question of direction and destiny has become one of great complexity and soul searching” (9). Her main protest is against the erasing and deleting of their own ancestral cultural traditions with the rise of modernistic values.

Literature Review:

Although a lot of criticism has focused on the eco-critical perspective, gendered angle, historicism, and subaltern studies on Dai's texts, very few researches have so far dealt with the aspect of cultural liminality in the specific work of Mamang Dai's *The Legends of Pensam*. Thus, this particular paper differs from that of other researchers who have written on various aspects of Dai's writings since those are published over the last two decades. To make the research area more specific and explicit, the following are the papers and thesis which have already been published before, or to some extents have nurtured the concept of cultural liminal space or in-betweenness in Dai's works.

Paban Chakraborty in his paper "'The Hidden Valleys of My Home': Home, Identity and Environmental Justice in the Select Works of Mamang Dai'" (2019) elucidates that the hidden chasms of Mamang Dai's world are the hidden words and traditions that Dai upholds through her narratives. The pristine landscape of the Adis exists only in between the dominant culture and the culture of the people of the land of Arunachal Pradesh. It is through her representation of the silent movement of the rivers and the dense forests that these valleys rewrite the history of creation. Hashami in his thesis "Tradition and Transition in Selected Works of Women Novelists from the North-East India" (2018) draws on the idea how various changes that have taken place in the indigenous tribes of North-East India as they have confronted with the modernization and have undergone a transformation on the grounds of the region and the place (Hashami 2). On speaking about Dai's *The Legends of Pensam*, Hashami narrates that the tribal people had conversed, blending animistic stories which detail faith with actual happenings, myths with reality and spirits with real people, an ethnic group's cultures and beliefs coexisting with the development of modern sensibilities (Hashami 138). Samrita Sinha in her paper, "Narrative Strategies of Decolonisation: Autoethnography in Mamang Dai's *The Legends of Pensam*", speaks on the colonial effects in the life of the Adi tribes, who retaliates back with their only effective tool of protest that is oral tradition. Meghamala Satapathy and Ipsita Nayak in their paper "The Lioness Defending Her Clan in the North East: A Study of Ecospiritual Elements in Mamang Dai's Fiction", elucidates the importance of ecospiritualism in the tribal lifestyle.

Liminality: The eccentric sense of liminality in Dai's *The Legends of Pensam* is drawn with the exact lines in the novel:

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. (vii)

The term 'liminality' accumulated from the Latin word "limen" meaning 'threshold', has been traced from French, Dutch and German folklorist Arnold van Gennep's book *Le Rites De Passage* in 1909, which was later in 1960 translated into English as *The Rites of Passage*. Van Gennep explained that the activities of a man's life crisis can be analysed on grounds of order and content and categorized as the *rites of passage*, which can be further divided into three categories: *rites of separation*, *transition* and *rites of incorporation*. Arpad Szakolczai, a critic finds liminality as not only the founding term of modern anthropology but also an important concept of philosophy. The Latin "limit" is equal to the Greek *peras*, so liminality makes the sense of "removing the limit" (Horvath et. al 11). Turner finds the term 'liminoid' as an independent subject of creative pursuits as he mentions that the solitary artist "is privileged to make free with his social heritage" (*Liminal to Liminoid* 84). Turner finds the liminal period at a point in which all gradations between the instructors or neophytes are completely "eliminated", (*The Forest* 99) Jasper Balduk, a Geography researcher in his Master thesis, *On liminality Conceptualizing 'in between-ness'*, examines liminality as the threshold that "stands for neutral territory", (vi) and explains forests, oceans or deserts as a liminal zone that erases all boundaries between the centre and the periphery. Critic Bjorn Thomassen in his work, *Liminality and the Modern: Living Through the In-Between*, expounds liminality as the in-between passages which hold an indefinite "unsettling situation" on one hand and a typically potentially "unlimited freedom" (1) on the other hand. Homi K. Bhabha, in his book *The Location of Culture*, defines 'beyond' as a new zone, "where space and time cross to produce complex figures of difference and identity, past and present" (2).

Researcher Catherine Bell talks of ritualization as a tool of protest against the subjugated social structures allocated in the cultural pattern of a society. Rituals are made to redeem the dominated and oppressed societies from the oppressing authorities and to allow one to create

their unique identity. Paula Townsend analyses how gender activities are different in the space of home. Patriarchal paradigms witness home as the public sphere for males and the private sphere for females. Critic Daphine Spain in her paper “Gendered Spaces and Women’s Status” finds how the female sex has less access to academics and public administration spaces compared to male and how spatial interference in the socio-cultural structures is complicatedly connected with gender stratification. She points out the fact that men and women’s workspaces are always distinguished in male-dominated structures where men have fewer restrictions in their working space compared to women, who are mostly allowed to survive in a fixed territory. Edward T. Hall in his work *The Silent Language* explains the concept of fixed territory of individuals where a physical boundary exists in the surrounding of every person wherever they settle or move themselves and this leads to the mode of a different type of communication. Horvath et. al explain the theory of transition and transformation by stating the fact that living experiences can cause liminal dimensions and ultimately metamorphoses one’s existence, “Lived experience transforms human beings and the larger social circles in which they partake- cognitively, emotionally, and morally, and therefore significantly contributes to the transmission of ideas and formation of structures” (2).

Liminal angle in *The Legends of Pensam*: *The Legends of Pensam*, a web of short stories published in 2006, captures the daily life structures of the Adi tribes, who are the main subject of this book. Dai’s narrative emerges on a painted lyrical canvas between civilized and uncivilized, between tradition and modernity, between myth and reality, and between logic and spiritualism. Dai unveils the specific geographical area of her tribal clans claiming it is as one of the largest and greenest states of the country bordering “Bhutan, China and Myanmar”, (*Legendsxi*) identified as a part of the Eastern Himalayas, the land is covered by rivers and mountain ranges, out of which the mightiest is “the Siang, known as the Tsangpo in Tibet, and the Siang valley, stretching northwards to the Tsangpo gorge where the river enters India” (ix) is the exact area of the Adi dwellers. This description highlights the fact of the existence of borderland and Bhabha’s concept that borderline gives birth to a new presence or introduction of a new identity. In the novel, Dai writes, “I was born in the mountains, in a village where boys kicked rocks pretending at football.” (3) Dai’s words expounds the fact, that there is no limit to the borderland territory of her ‘home’ wavering between India and Tibet, and beyond promises a new beginning so even if

the culture of sports has not gained much prominence in the remote villages of Arunachal Pradesh but the kicking of footballs marks a new beginning of development and a signature identity. Again at the end of the novel, Rakut claims their unique identity of solely depending on the oral stories of their land, “The most beautiful thing is that we are all bunched up together...far apart from each other in so many ways, but we have words, and the right words open our minds and hearts and help us to recognize each other.” (191) This proves that even though the tribes are located far away from the priority lens of the Center but the isolation has helped them to gain a distinctive form of recognition and a signature identity.

Bhabha describes the interstitial passage as a mixing of the past and the present events. Accordingly in the novel, we come across a cultural show in the Pigo town which creates an interstitial passage by mixing “yesterday and today” (184) and intelligently exchanges thoughts of old-style presentations and new modern and advanced talents. In another case, Rakut’s father makes an announcement “about preserving our (ancestral) roots, because the past is being cast away by many people”, (114) also it is observed that the stage is decorated with freshly cut bamboo sticks which is a predominant culture among the tribal lifestyle, and in the same instance, a colonial practice is incorporated with a cloth banner on which it is seen “big, bold letters in the miglun language that Nenem could barely decipher: W-E-L-C-O-M-E”, (114) thus the show generates an anarchist act of cultural transformation and also the practice of rituals of status elevation where the tribes (often referred to as people from subordinate status) are performing the rituals of the migluns (often referred to as people of elevated status) by adapting their languages. Another glimpse of cultural hybrid space is witnessed with Jules offering a bottle of rum to Hoxo and Rakut and Jules being offered a bamboo tube full of rice beer by the villagers.

The character Hoxo is motivated by the shamanic practice of the Adi tribal society, as he says, “Some things are beyond recall, and such things happen all the time. It is better to be ready” (19). His words associate his presence in Edward Soja’s concept of thirdspace, as he could form a space between the perceived and the conceived world. The author locates Hoxo’s presence in a “timeless zone” (24) or a thirdspace between the real and the imagined worlds. Hoxo’s daily pursuits are related to researching the lives of men, animals, trees and the origin of the universe or to think about how to be a good chess player. All these activities can be linked

with Victor Turner's concept of the liminoid under which Hoxo draws his breathing space. Apart from these, it is also noticed that Rakut and Hoxo are finding out their liminoid spaces by talking their heart out to the trees or walking miles after miles in search of nature's beauty. Pinyar is making use of the oral traditions and the rituals intact with them to extract her daily liminoid sphere, as she says, "Faith is everything" (35).

Another interesting angle is derived out of the temporary love between Nenem and David when Dai says about Nenem, "Through him she saw the world beyond. She saw cities and streets full of people and heard the skies reverberating with the sound of airplanes that filled her with a longing for far-off places", (100) reminding Bhabha's concept of 'beyond' as the level of progress and a step towards development. As the foreigners step into the land of the tribes, the touch of modernity can perhaps lead them towards better achievements as success is quite similar to the level of mainland India.

Nenem crosses many liminal passages in her love life and marriage life. When Nenem initiates the business of selling oranges in the Pigo town with her two friends, marking the rites of incorporation, a miglun officer known as Captain David Ferguson steps in her business spot and paves the route for stepping into a new threshold because sooner David and Nenem falls for each other and celebrates their love by fixing dates. This intensive love relationship is prepared in between the parameters of liminality as both Nenem and David stands as a foreigner or an outsider in Pigo town and therefore they waver between two worlds or get bounded between the insider and outsider politics. Nenem belongs to the hills and David originated to in a foreign country, carrying components of Van Gennep's profanity but by structuralizing the ritual of love that grows between the two lovers, they achieve a sacred space and by making a love story between a tribal woman and a British officer, they even get to escalate a transformed status.

Just as Nenem, Pinyar also crosses many series of rites of passage in her life, when at a very young age, she is forcefully married to a man named Orka, who abandons her after she gives birth to a son named Kamur. Right after the separation from Orka, Pinyar is again forcefully married to another decent man, but unfortunately, that man dies within five years of their marriage and Pinyar becomes a widow when she is not even twenty-five years old. The ritual of marriage is categorized as rites of incorporation, pregnancy as rites of initiation and a negative rite and the ritual of being a widow is categorized as the rites of separation. Thus Pinyar

is an example of van Gennep's rites of passage theory. Even the narrator is seen undergoing a journey as she is on a helicopter, changing status from one place to another and from Guwahati, she is incorporating in her mother's village. So this separation from one land to incorporation into the other land can also be counted as the rites of passages. Sirsiri, a lady from the Gurgum town can be adequately categorized under Thomassen's liminal theory, because she gets anxious and disturbed by her married life on the one hand and tries to make peace with music on the other hand. The workspaces of men and women are also different Sirsiri works in radio and her husband Pessa is a government employee. Pinyar and Arsi are seen working in the fields and kitchen whereas the village men are mostly away working with the village security, administration and also with the British to settle the land disputes. Another lady character named Issam is portrayed in the novel, who could sense her husband being a man is careless about the looters and plunderers of the village "but she could not stand to fight against the issue being a woman" (Sarkar and Rai 68). Thus, it is detected that the patriarchal roles of men and women are distinguished from one another. Men are restricted from entering in the kitchen space and women are banned to practice administrative related roles in the tribal society.

The tribes' daily life is also channelized by the actions and instructions of the shamans. The shamans are nominated to be the dictator of collective memory, where the oral stories are fixed and the life of the people practicing the oral stories are constantly floating. Donyi polo plays an important role in the life of the indigenous societies, who is considered their guide, as the shaman comments, "almighty Donyi-polo, the sun and the moon, whose light shines on all equally" (57).

Conclusion: The tribes in 'The Land of the Dawn lit Mountains' have been pushed to a limited space, extremely away from the literature of the so-called literate side of the mainland Indians, confronting seclusion and alienation. And this exclusion has compelled the indigenous section to develop their intense connection with their own motherland and the natural resources around them. In order to overcome the in-between strategy and to discover a space of comfort in their daily routine, they have forced themselves to accept the oral world and claim their unique identity. In the present world, these tribes of Arunachal and Assam are trying to unite among themselves, reconciling under one single umbrella, ignoring the barriers of internal conflicts, to acquire their signature identity and status. Throughout the periodic transition from the pre-

colonial to the postcolonial era, these tribal communities have suffered from a sense of uprootedness, configured in the unstable life patterns of the indigenous tribes who have settled in the remote villages or the historically unrecognized territory of Arunachal Pradesh. Mamang Dai in her novel *The Legends of Pensam* has precisely suggested the cultural patterns and ritualistic practices of these tribes who have always embraced a daily routine between the fixed and floating worlds. She has categorically pinpointed the cultural transformation and the psychological transitions that have interrupted the mind and daily life of the Adi tribes. The Eurocentricism that touched India acquiring the status of being the Centre and pushing the East to the margin, has exactly been retained in the same manner during the cultural exchange between the mainland India and the peripheral India even in the post-colonial times. The indigenous population of the North East India who has been treated as the savage is propelled to grab the boundary. And while claiming to be the autochthons of those marginalized lands, these tribal societies have delimited themselves to an oral imaginative sphere of existence.

Works Cited

- Balduik, Jasper. *On liminality Conceptualizing 'in between-ness'*. June 2008. Radboud University, Master Thesis.
- Bell, Catherine. *Ritual Theory, Ritual Practice*. OUP, 1992.
- Bhabha, Homi. K. *The Location of Culture*. Routledge, 1994.
- Chakraborty, Paban. "'The Hidden Valleys of My Home': Home, Identity, and Environmental Justice in the Select Works of Mamang Dai." *Sanglap* vol.5, no.2, 2019, pp. 53-60, *Sanglap Journal of Literary and Cultural Inquiry*. <https://pdfs.semanticscholar.org/fd0c/f716ab0dcf61246eba733bfbdbd6be7e9006.pdf>.
- Dai, Mamang. *Arunachal Pradesh: The Hidden Land*. Penguin Group, 2009.
- . "Oral Narratives and Myth." *Glimpses from the North-East*, 2009, pp.1-8. <http://14.139.60.153/bitstream/123456789/1199/1/Glimpses%20from%20the%20North-East.pdf#page=9>
- . *The Legends of Pensam*. Penguin Books India, 2006.
- , (editor). *The Inheritance of Words: Writings from Arunachal Pradesh*. First edition, Zubaan Publishers, 2021.
- Hashami, Mohammad Rijavan. *Tradition and Transition in Select works of Woman Novelists from the Northeast India*. 2018, Benaras Hindu University, Ph.D Thesis.
- Hall, Edward Twitchell, and T. Hall. *The Silent Language*. Library of Congress Catalog, 1959. <https://lccn.loc.gov/59006359>.
- Horvath, Agnes, Bjørn Thomassen, and Harald Wydra, editors. *Breaking Boundaries: Varieties of liminality*. Berghahn Books, 2015.
- Sarkar, Aninnya, and Indrani Singh Rai. "With the Margin: The Theme of Gendered Subaltern in Mamang Dai's The Legends of Pensam." *South Asian Research Journal of Arts Language and Literature*, vol.4, no.2, 2022, pp. 65-69, SAR Publication, https://sarpublication.com/media/articles/SARJALL_42_65-69.pdf.
- Satapathy, Meghamala, and Ipsita Nayak. "The Lioness Defending Her Clan in the North East: A Study of Ecospiritual Elements in Mamang Dai's Fiction." *Rupkatha Journal on Interdisciplinary Studies in Humanities*, vol.12,no.5,2020,pp.1-8, https://www.researchgate.net/publication/346962870_The_Lioness_Defending_Her_Clan_in_the_North_East_A_Study_of_Ecospiritual_Elements_in_Mamang_Dai's_Fiction
- Sinha, Samrita. "Narrative Strategies of Decolonisation: Autoethnography in Mamang Dai's The Legends of Pensam." *Rupkatha Journal on Interdisciplinary Studies in Humanities*, vol.12, no.5, 2020, pp. 1-10, DOI: [10.21659/rupkatha.v12n5.rioc1s18n4](https://doi.org/10.21659/rupkatha.v12n5.rioc1s18n4).

- Soja, Edward. *Thirdspace: Journeys to Los Angeles and Other Real-and-Imagined Places*. Blackwell Publishers, 1996.
- Thomassen, Bjørn. *Liminality and the Modern: Living Through the In-Between*. Ashgate Publishing Company, 2014.
- Townsend, Paula. "Gendered Space? An Exploration of the Gendered Meaning and Experience of 'Home' in Contemporary British Society." *FORUM: eJournal for Postgraduate Studies in Architecture, Planning and Landscape*. vol. 3.no. 1, 2000, pp. 40-46.
- Turner, Victor. "Liminality and Communitas." *The Ritual Process: Structure and Anti-structure*, vol. 94, no.113, 1969, pp. 125-30. <http://faculty.trinity.edu/mbrown/whatisreligion/PDF%20readings/TurnerVictor-%20Liminality%20and%20Communitas.pdf>
- . "Liminal to Liminoid, in Play, Flow, and Ritual: An Essay in Comparative Symbology." *Rice Institute Pamphlet-Rice University Studies*, vol. 60, no.3, 1974, pp. 53-92. *Rice Digital Scholar Archive*, https://scholarship.rice.edu/bitstream/handle/1911/63159/article_RIP603_part4.pdf?sequence=1&isAllowed=y
- . *The Forest of Symbols: Aspects of Ndembu Ritual*. Cornell University Press, 1970.
- Van Gennep, Arnold. *The Rites of Passage*. Translated by Monika B. Vizedom and Gabrielle L. Caffee, UP of Chicago Press, 1960.

