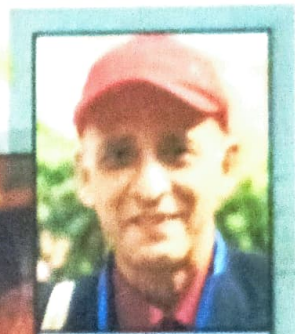


North-East Indian Writings in English

A Spectrum of Critical Essays

K.V. Raghupathi



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English
A Spectrum of Critical Essays**

Edited By

Dr. K.V. Raghupathi

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MYTHS AND LEGENDS OF THE ADIS IN *THE LEGENDS OF PENSAM*

LEKSHMI MOHAN

Myths and legends are keys to the cultural past of a region. They are predecessors to history and science and hence help us understand the ethos of the community which nurture them. The cultural unconscious of a community is a reservoir of its beliefs, world views, realities and ideologies out of which myths and legends are created. They are saved in their collective memory and proliferated across generations through story telling. They are forms of traditional narratives. According to Lewis Spence "myth expresses man's relation to universe". It includes the deeds of gods and supernatural beings, the ontology of a community and the reason behind the formation of its beliefs and practices. Legend on the other hand is generally "a story of real places, real persons, handed down by tradition" (Spence 4).

Mamang Dai, poet- novelist from Arunachal Pradesh, in her fiction *The Legends of Pensam* portrays a world where the land and the rivers, the natural and the supernatural, the human and the gods, the real and the magical coexist, though not altogether peacefully. The novel revolves around the lives of the Adi tribe of Arunachal Pradesh whose life style and customs are largely unknown to others. Dai gives her readers a vivid picture of the Adi's ways of life, beliefs, rituals, knowledge systems and a bit of history through their own stories studded with myths and legends. Arunachal Pradesh which borders Bhutan, Myanmar and China is one of the largest states of India. A land blessed with rivers, mountains and forests Arunachal Pradesh is also the homeland of around twenty-six tribes. The

central part of the state which is the area occupied by the Adis in the one of the remotest areas of the state with fewer road links. The novella *The Legends of Pensam* attempts to make a revisit to the Adis' lush past, to gather the history, beliefs and rituals of the community. It is as if the past lives with them along with their stories which are a fascinating combo of memory and myth. Their stories map the painful process of change the tribe underwent during different ages and the frustration and disappointment the people at the loss of many things which they could not define. The book traverses through five generations, exposing the various cultural invasions the Adis tribe have undergone. The present paper attempts to analyse the myths and legends of the Adis. Threaded with stories, the plot of the novella offers the picture of a liminal space where the real encounters the magical. The lives of the Adis, enmeshed in a web of stories, cannot be separated from the mythopoeic world in spite of the various socio-cultural and political changes happened to their region.

In his work *The Predicament of Culture: Twentieth Century Ethnography, Literature and Art*, James Clifford observes, "throughout the world indigenous populations have to reckon with the forces of progress and national unification. The result has been both destructive and inventive . . . if the victims of progress and empire are weak, they are seldom passive" (16). The legends and myths coming from a community defy the homogenising tendencies of modernity that defines itself on the basis of reason and common sense. Thus myths and legends, propagated through the Adis' stories, can be seen as alternate beliefs and histories unrecorded in the socio-cultural historiography of India. Here the act of storytelling becomes an ongoing performance which brings the past and the mythical to the present, evolving itself by incorporating experiences from the day today life. Gulshan Rao Kataria in his essay "Myth in Literary Criticism" says:

Myths explain the history and rationale of a community's institutions, customs or social laws. By telling the story of a people. . . a myth supports their sense of solidarity and purpose, and confidence and pride in themselves. . . They verbalise what a community has collectively felt or experienced and elaborate a tribe's common psychological and spiritual aspirations (qtd. in Das 63)

Myths and legends are often seen as antithetical to history since they are regarded as imaginative narratives coming from an

age unrecorded in document. According to Roland Barthes myth hides its ideology and is a special way of speech (5). The dominant culture uses myths and legends to propagate its values which are believed as truths. This often leads to the disappearance of other cultures whose stories are soon forgotten along with their belief systems. The culture of the Adis is one among them. Like the other indigenous communities elsewhere in the world, the Adis are also facing severe identity crisis in the midst of the vast changes happening around them. Their existence is vividly portrayed in the title itself. In her opening note Dai writes, "In our language . . . the word pensam means 'in between'. It suggests the middle, or middle ground . . . where anything can happen and everything can be lived . . ." (n.pag.).

The Legends of Pensam lacks a central character or protagonist and a single plot, unlike a conventional novel. Here we have a group of people and each has equal importance in the narrative. Each of them has a tale to remember. The animistic faith of the Adis together with the supernatural spirits and shamans bring a magical milieu to the plot. The opening section of the novella tells us about the myth of Hoxo's birth. To the Adis, Hoxo is the boy who fell from the sky. Hoxo fell from the sky into Lutor's hand who was the chief of Ida clan. Lutor died in a hunting accident later. The clan attributed Lutor's death to his ill-fated sighting of Biribik, the water serpent with horns. For the people, if anybody happens to see Biribik, he will soon encounter a danger. The Adis have premonitions and they believe in omens. Dai says how the introduction of fire arms in the hills created a large number of widows. Hunting has become a passion which often resulted in deaths of people in accidents during hunting, when men were mistaken for preys.

Many people of the community lack formal education, but they possess wisdom and knowledge which can be seen in the empathy and hospitality they show towards the narrator's friend Mona and Jules. Hoxo is presented as a seer who can read one's mind. The narrator says about Hoxo, "When I had spoken about Adela's autism, he had listened and understood, and been able to express his sorrow for Mona quietly, where as I had had to look up the term in the library when she first told me." (24)

The story of Pinyar leads us to another belief among the Adis. When the narrator and his friend visit Pinyar, she has just only crossed the period of taboo the community gave her, for she is the luckless owner of a fire-coat house. Pinyar tells the myth of the rice

beer, which is the traditional appetiser of the community. According to the myth, only the *mili-mili*, a race of the supernatural beings, made the drink first, by fermenting rice. Before their disappearance, they handed over its secret recipe to the Adis. Only women are allowed to handle it. However, rice beer is strictly forbidden before a hunt or a journey as it makes men hallucinate. Pinyar says, "there is a very bad spirit lurking in *si-ye* that makes men go mad" (29). In the world of the Adis, the supernatural exists like the ordinary. "They understood that it was a nebulous zone that divided the worlds of spirits and men-in fact, at one time, men and spirits have been brothers" (31). When Pinyar's son Kamur killed his kids in a trance, people attributed its cause to the working of the spirits and almost empathized with the psychologically deranged Kamur. Pinyar herself called a shaman to do rituals for her son. Unlike the 'modern' men, the Adis do not consider myths as the wisdom of a bygone era. It is a living practice among them. The supernatural and the natural, the real and the magical are juxtaposed without any hierarchies.

In another context, a *miri*, a great shaman, stresses the need to remember. He dictates the myth about the ontology of the Adis and the origin of knowledge. "In the beginning, there was only Keyum. Nothingness. It was neither darkness, no light, nor had it any colour, shape or movement. Kayum is the remote past, way beyond the reach of our senses. . . . Out of this place, the great stillness, the first flicker of thought began to shine like a light in the soul of man" (56). To the Adis, knowledge comes from within. It comes from man's remembrance of past. Such narration on ontology and spirituality throws light on the Adis' strong connection with nature which they still maintain. This acts as a counter narrative to Western modernity whose founding principle is logic or reason. Myths, passed on to next generation through stories, are like roots which fix the people to their own land and tradition.

The novella presents a number of legends associated with hills. The legend of Komsing, the legend of David and Nenem, and the legends of 'migluns' or the foreigners are prominent among them. The historical incidents of colonial intervention in Arunachal Pradesh are recalled in these legends. The British political-cultural encroachment forms an important epoch in the history of the hills. The resistance made by the Adis against the British troops are seldom recorded in the official history of India. The metanarrative of Indian Independence struggle still revolves around the resistance movements in North, Central and South India. It was in 1880s that

the first priests, surveyors and soldiers reached the hills. The older men and women have passed on memories of migluns' arrival to their children. They knew that amidst their big caves and evergreen forests a road was being carved out. "Reports reaching the villages said that the migluns were digging a tunnel right across the world" (Dai 38). The labourers were recruited from the hill tribes. The youth of the time refused to join the labour force. There were various 'rumours' and 'scandals' spreading about migluns. "It was said that there were different types of migluns and some of them had wings" (39). The tribesmen were forced to work the work of a devil. To defeat the rocky mountains, the dense woods and the swampy valleys was an arduous and dangerous task. Hoxo tells that the road has been forgotten for long now. It has become a no man's land and the only people now live there now are the men with guns. Hoxo here refers to the insurgents who are using the roads now as a safe corridor between India and Myanmar.

When Jules the French partner of Mona talks about the importance for adopting grass root strategies of forest management, Hoxo recalls how gracious their forest was once upon a time. A green and virgin land once existed there under a gracious and just rule. The old chieftians were admired and obeyed as they were akin to gods. No one stole or killed any man. The chiefs consulted with the sky, the sacred fire and the spirits before delivering justice. Food was sown, harvested, stored and dispensed fairly. Fathers and sons followed the footsteps of their ancestors. But the canopy of shelter and tradition had fallen when the foreigners came with their axe. The spirits dwelt on tree tops, lost their abode and went away. Hoxo says, "We need courage and faith in the face of change. That is all we can do" (43). The crisis the tribe faces at the changes around them is evident in his words.

The Legend of Komsing is another living story about anti-colonial resistance in the hill. The early decades of the 20th century were times of great upheaval in the hills. A British army man named Noel Williamson who had twenty years of experience in dealing with the tribes was killed by an Adi in 1911. Other tribesmen followed him, followed by a massacre. Various reasons were attributed for the murder of Williamson. Along with Williamson, his friends and 47 sepoy were also killed. In 1912 The Abor Expeditionary Field force retaliated for the murder and culprits were captured and sent to the prison in the Andaman Islands. A memorial stone for Williamson was unveiled in Komsing to commemorate the incident. According

to Rakut, the villagers still look after the stone as per the British instructions.

The myths and legends of the Adis live through rituals and art performances. In the long nights fill with stories, myth and memory will be reborn in the song of Ponung dancers (50). The dancers recreate the stories of colonial resistances through their performances. They recall how people fought against the migluns and how they finally surrendered for peace. The miri or the shaman concludes the performance with his songs about the beginning of the world, of the villages and the people. The narrator says "These are stories, rhapsodies of time and destiny that he [the miri] must guard" (55). The songs and stories reincarnate through such performances never end. "It is a language that never ceases, and they sing because the hills are old, older than all sin and desolation and man's fascination with blood. The journey is almost over now; they are returning like the silent flight of birds" (55). Only a shaman, a witness to time and the changes brought about by it, can teach his men the legends which are not be forgotten.

The story of Nenem, the river woman and David, the British army officer is told to us through a photograph which is still kept by Nenem's daughter Losi. For them memories are to be kept forever. A simple thing like a book, photograph or a binocular is a treasure to them as it can take them to a green past. Nenem who did not follow her lover to England is the icon of pride. She is revered like a goddess by the clan as she symbolizes the land itself. Like her being her death was also mysterious. The earth quake which struck the hills on 15 August 1950 brought massive destruction to it. The river that Nenem loved so much has thrown off its course as a mountain collapsed and blocked its path. It was a fearful time and it was a sad time. The land and lives in it were changing. "Nenem stared at the restless, agitated land and her eyes scrutinized the broken line of the hills . . . it seemed her heart died very quietly" (127).

The legends not only mix the historic with memory but also show how the Adis, in spite of various cultural encroachments, attempt to preserve their roots. The concluding section of the novella "a matter of time" portrays the existential angst of the Adis. Like the wilderness which has lost its strength and richness, the people are also broken by the developmental activities initiated by the Indian government and its administrators. Though the migluns had left the land, another race of migluns still dominate their lives. The legend

of Pigo, a place of breath taking greenery, is told in this section. Once, a great robbery in Pigo. Their granary doors were broken and precious beads and jewels were stolen in that robbery. The village had moved to its own quiet rhythm for centuries with all certainties and beliefs, but the construction of road by the government disrupted Pigo's peace. Though a year has passed after the beginning of road works, it still remains incomplete. It winds the mountain like a broken ladder of dreams. Mamang Dai refers to the partial developmental activities in the region. In the summer rain the road will be crashed under falling rocks and boulders. The MLA Duan, son of Kedu could only partially convince his people about the government's concern over the issue of robbery.

The construction of the road upset the peace of the land altogether. Trees began to be cut down, mountains were carved and the carbide and other chemicals polluted their precious rivers. Even the traditional rice beer gets adulterated with dregs of coal tar and carbide. Larik, son of Togla, was one young man among many who voiced against the injustice meted to them. He said how old days of war and valour had vanished. They had surrendered ancestral lands to the government and now the road and the things that came with it seemed to be strangling them and threatening to steal their identity like a thief creeping to their villages and fields (156-57). Larik and his friends retaliated by destroying the roads and electric poles and burning the road builders' camp.

In spite of everything life moves on like their stories. Everyone shares their fate and bears the changing times though each has his own life to live. Dabo who works at Weights and Measures Department is a playwright too; Rigbi a pursuer of job too loves to cook for his friends, the narrator, though a journalist cannot tear herself away from her land and its people. Everyone is connected to each other and the land which sustain them. The people consider themselves a natural part of get-togethers like a dinner party, or a performance, the staging of a play, a ritual or even a funeral. They share a thick bonding. The narrator asks, "It was important to record our stories. The old rhapsodists were a dying breed, and when they were gone, who would remember? What happens to the people and places we forgot? Where do they go?" (177) We see Rakut writing down his ancestors' name in a sheet of paper because he believes that the one who forgets lack his soul'. The legends and myths told by them are memories which they never wish to die. If they are lost the

people will lose their soul too. Their stories are histories of their origin, their love and struggle with their hills and their proof of their existence.

Mamang Dai, in *The Legends of Pensam*, attempts to record the unwritten story of her own land. The writers of North East India have exploited the history, legends, folklores, rumours, day today events and mythology to dilate the experiences of mythic dimension. They have explored the glory of their lands to trace their identity against turmoil, identity crisis and self-alienation (Das 67). An excavation into the past richness and glory of their land is a part of their mission which aims to trace their identity against turmoil and alienation. Here the supernatural, the natural, and the human emerge as one family to survive and rescue themselves from extinction. Their folktales, myths and legends are not mere cultural icons; they show how the writers address cultural, environmental, and social issues affecting them via a counter narrative fortified through local histories and customs. The legendary Nenem tells her daughter Losi, "Keep this, this is the box of stories. . . You can shape them colour them and pull them out any time" (123). The ontology, history and evolution of the tribe unfurl through the stories studded with myths and legends, which are the propagators of their ethnic values. The stories of the Adis, that the writer gathers in the novella, originally transmitted across generations orally, are not depoliticized utterances; but a powerful rhetoric that upholds, affirms and sustains their ethnic life.

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