

Ecology and History in Mamang Dai's *The Legends of Pensam* and Easterine Iralu's *A Naga Village Remembered*: A Comparative Analysis

- Nigamananda Das

Abstract

India's Northeast is one amongst the World's 25 biodiversity hotspots and 17 biodiversity heritage sites. Ecologically rich as it is, the literary genres from the region explore the flora and fauna and the mysterious ecology and expose eco-consciousness of its people and other ethnic realities. As such the ecological writings are canonical as they expose the postcolonial ecological erosions. So far the Penguin India has published more than half a dozen fictional works of authors from various provinces of the Northeast. These works explore the ecology and history of the region. The paper aims at analyzing an Arunachalee writer, Mamang Dai's novel *The Legends of Pensam* (Penguin, 2006) and a Naga writer Easterine Iralu's *A Naga Village Remembered* (2003), comparing their ecological and historical concerns. These first generation post-colonial first novels in English from the two different provinces of the Northeast India showcase to the world some unknown chapters of India's history and ecology.

Keywords:

Ethnic Realities, Postcolonial Ecological Erosion, Ecotheology, Ecotheosopy, Toxic Consciousness

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As a contrast to the "toxic consciousness" (Deitering 202) represented by the post-1980s postnatural American novels, the novels in English from India's Northeast, especially *The Legends of Pensam* by Mamang Dai and *A Naga Village Remembered* by Easterine Iralu explore the ecology and history of their respective regions which have remained unexplored in writing till date. Mamang Dai, an ecopoet and fictionist from Arunachal

has mixed history with ecology and ecotheology to provide the readers with a recipe of unique taste, which reflects an in-between place in the mountains of Arunachal Pradesh. A former civil servant, now turned journalist, Mamang interprets the “hidden spaces of heart where a secret garden grows” (vii). Her exploration of ecology in the tribal world of Arunachal has mostly been restricted to her own community of Adis. She says, “Like the majority of tribes inhabiting the central belt of Arunachal, the Adis practise an animistic faith that is woven around forest ecology and co-existence with the natural world.” (i)

The Legends of Pensam evokes the “toxic consciousness” in presenting a comparative exploration of the past. The situations and surroundings of the past were completely different from what we are in. The fictionist in the prologue voices the same:

We make no comparisons now. The river cuts through our land as before in its long journey to the sea. In spring the red flowers still blaze against our sky. But the old people now, the few of them alive, turn slowly in their sleep as the fires burn down to a heap of ash. In the middle of the night a bird swoops low and calls out in a wild, staccato note. The thatch rustles. The bamboo creaks. *The darkness is full of breath and sighs* (italic mine). (4)

The paragraph above presents a few contours of ecology. It presents nature in broader sense. It may be the total cosmos and beyond and it depicts the chasm between the past and present. That chasm depicting *darkness is full of breath and sighs* (italic mine) is nostalgic, chaotic, toxic and significantly disturbing. We feel that we had something better in the past which we have lost now. As such our mind is occupied in a constant comparison between the experiences felt and the present feeling.

Divided into four sections, the novel consisting of an intricate web of nineteen stories, presents the history of a tribe which comprises a “moving tribute to the human spirit” (blurb). These stories are like legends narrating incidents or accidents relating to popular figures in the Adi clan of Arunachal. The stories depict “pensam” (inbetweenness) of several kinds. The very first legend “the boy who fell from the sky” speaks of Hoxo who saw “a green wall of trees and bamboo, and a green waterfall that sprayed his cheek and washed the giant fern that seemed to be waving to him” (7). “*The colour green always soothed him. It was the colour of escape and solitude*” (8). The legend concludes in informing that Hoxo’s father, Lutor, the famous Chief of the Ida clan was killed in hunting accident leaving behind his widow wife and son. Before changes came in shape of post-colonial encounters, life in the tribal world though seemed to be very difficult and uncertain, was happy, meaningful and magical.

In the tribal world of Arunachal, the mysterious prevails plentifully. A married woman would become a widow at any time. Nature and spirit, even evil spirits played games with human life. The story titled “Pinyar, the widow” reveals how Pinyar who became a widow before she was twenty-five years old. Pinyar in spite of oppositions from her parents and relatives fell in love with a man named Orka from a village beyond Siyum hills, far to the north of the country (26) and bore a son named Kamur from him, but the marriage failed and Orka left her taking his son Kamur

away. Pinyar remarried a man named Lekon and became widow in the third month of her marriage as her husband Lekon was struck down in a hunting accident. Her lonely life was again threatened when her hut one day was accidentally caught fire and turned into ashes and that removed her to forest seclusion as per their tribal tradition. Her son Kamur who was well settled with a government job, two sons and an infant daughter was accidentally in trouble one day due to a trance like fit that invaded his soul and made him mad so that he killed his infant daughter and one son with a rusty *dao* and attacked his wife who fortunately survived due to the intervention of the neighbours.

The mysterious / magical trance which troubles most human in the tribal world is believed to be from two or three sources of intoxication. These sources may be rice beer which is prohibited for the hunter before his hunting expedition, or the spirits and some trees having evil spirits boarded on them. About the rice beer and the race of *miti-mili* it is said:

Once upon a time, there lived a race of supernatural beings called *miti-mili*. These small, quiet people were the first to make mysterious *si-ye* that is the yeast used to ferment rice into beer. Before the *miti-mili* race disappeared, deranged by strange visions, they gave this sacred powder to mankind, and a strong belief grew that *si-ye* had special powers and that it was something to be handled with respect. Only women were allowed to handle it, and Pinyar herself made the best *si-ye* cakes. She mixed the white powder with ground rice and roots and berries and shaped it into small flat biscuits. ... they are strictly forbidden before a hunt or a journey. ... 'It makes men hallucinate, just like the *miti-mili* race. But sometimes some households forget to observe the rules, and then our men die in the forests.' (29)

About the peculiar trees which have magical powers that intoxicate, human minds and make them commit sins, it is said:

People talked about the peculiar trees of the place. They remembered the aubergine plant that had grown to the size of a tree. Nobody could recall who had planted it or when. It bore small poisonous looking flowers that grew into long, bloated fruit, menacing and shiny. It was a ghostly tree and no one dared to cut it down. Kamur had sometimes been seen under that tree at odd hours, doing nothing in particular.(31)

The guardians of history speculate on the troubles in the tribal surroundings and feel that there is something in the blood or some spirits and ghosts or marriages (right or wrong) that are responsible for these accidents (ibidem).

Narration of ecology and ecocriticism "*involves a deliberate act of prestidigitation, a problematic process in which an identity is projected onto nature*" (Head 235). Again [Lawrence] Buell's 'aesthetic of relinquishment' actually involves the need to imagine 'non-human agents as bonafide partners', and in his discussion of 'Nature's Personhood' Buell considers how, in environmental law, our identity can be assigned to nature 'to engineer a change in the legal and ethical status quo by a discursive innovation frankly announced as fictive' (ibidem).

Mamang Dai through her chain of stories called *The Legends of Pensam* has asserted an identity of Arunachal and its tribes by associating the tribal life and activities with nature. Everything happens here in the

bosom of nature. The natural surroundings and human and nonhuman transactions assume unlimited dimensions. Ecology encompasses all human and non-human transactions in all the spaces. Mamang mixes history, ecology and ecotheology / ecotheosophy to give an understanding of the total tribal ecological and historical tradition in Arunachal, especially her own Adi Tribe. The novel contains several paragraphs on the ecology – types of landscape and related traditions which Mamang calls “small histories” (36):

Everyday I saw clouds dropping lower and lower like ominous waves. The hills were blue, their outline rimmed in black, and the trees were still. Soon, the first fat beads of water would tear the giant leaves of the wild yam. Then fierce, hissing rain would cover the land like the sea.

At such times it seems the heavens brush very close to the earth. The wild fruit born of this union is of unknown family, bittersweet, pungent, often misshapen and hardy, or swollen to an unnatural size. Hidden by mountains and covered by a charcoal sky the forest and rivers become battlefields ferocious with the struggle for survival (36-37)

The ecology of Arunachal was unknown to the other world up to the nineteenth century.

“The first white priests, surveyors and soldiers had begun arriving in the region almost two hundred years ago, in the early 1800s. Since then people from other worlds had come and gone, though the only records of their journeys are the stories that the older men and women remember.” (37-38)

After the white men's entry into this fantastic ecological paradise, changes have been rapid. The early decades of the 20th century witnessed great upheaval. In 1911, a British political officer set out from the plains of Assam on a mission to explore the course of the river Siang flowing through the territory of the Adis. He was Noel Williamson, with twenty years of experience in dealing with the tribes in the hill tracts of the country. But unfortunately an angry Adi struck him down in the village of Komsing. It developed into massacre where Williamson, his tea garden doctor friend Dr. Gregorson, forty seven sepoy and coolies were killed. The three men who survived told the world what really happened. News of the massacre sent shockwaves across colonial India and resulted in punitive expedition of 1912, which become known as the Abor Expeditionary Field Force. A memorial stone to Williamson was unveiled, where it stands now even looked after by the villagers as the British had instructed (48).

In the midst of the dense natural surrounding there exists the tribal theology / theosophy which is also ecological. Prior to the advent of Christianity into this ecology, there was the traditional tribal religion, which still exists. The Arunachalee tribals believe in the Almighty *Donyi-polo*, the sun and the moon (57). The priest chants verses, tells tales to the folk who sit before him to listen. He explains, “*We are not here without a purpose*” (56). And adds:

Our purpose is to fulfil our destiny. The life of a man is measured by his actions and his actions are good if their origin is pure. From nothingness we have come to be born under the stars and almighty Donyi-polo, the sun and the moon, whose light shines on all equally,

is the invisible force that guides each one of us. All life is light and shadow; we live and we die, and the path of destiny is the quest for faith. (57)

Again about the whole creation/ecology the priest says:

In the beginning, there was only Keyum. Nothingness. It was neither darkness nor light, nor had it any colour, shape or movement. Keyum is the remote past, way beyond the reach of our senses. It is the place of ancient things from where no answer is received. Out of this place of great stillness, the first flicker of thought began to shine like a light in the soul of man. It became a shimmering trail, took shape and expanded and became the Pathway. Out of this nebulous zone, a spark was born that was the light of imagination. The spark grew into a shining stream that was the consciousness of man and from this all the stories of the world and all its creatures came into being. (56)

Mamang Dai mixing memory, desire, history and religion with ecology provides a real picture in fiction. The work is a landmark in postcolonial writing and being the first English novel from Arunachal Pradesh it is very important work in contemporary Indian Writing in English.

Easterine Irulu's *A Naga Village Remembered* is also the first novel in English by a Naga writer. The book being a historical account of the proud Khonoma village and the Battle of Khonoma (1879-1880) and the activities of the American Baptist Mission and the first converts, also depicts the ecology and history of the hilly terrain and the faith of its people. Consisting of fourteen chapters, the novel presents a detailed account the Battle of Khonoma and bravery of the Angami tribes of the village and the surrounding hills. In the introduction to the book the novelist gives a description of the village as is given below:

Khonoma nestles amid mountains that are as high as 7,000 feet, a little village on a small hillock, cradled by gaunt mountains which form a natural fortress. Hidden from human view by this natural fortress of mountains, Khonoma can be seen from only one direction in the Northern Angami region between Meriema and Chieswema. Though her size of 500 houses was rather average among Angami villages, her fame spread far and wide as a warrior village. Her warriors of the Semo, Thevo and Merhu clans hardly numbered over a thousand at any given time in her history. However, Khonoma's protectorate extended in every direction, to the Southern, Northern, Eastern and Western Angami and Naga villages. To her north, there was some Sopfuma villages of the Shepoumaranth region who lived under protective alliances with Khonoma. Still further to the north, Khonoma's fame spread as far as the Maram and Anal regions on the borders of the Manipur kingdoms. On her north-western borders her name was respected all over the Zeliangrong region right up to the forts of the Kachar kingdom. On her south-eastern borders, Khonoma's fame was known through villages under her protectorate. On her northern borders, she had alliances with many villages. The kingdom of Manipur too knew of Khonoma's fame and had at one time sent Manipuri soldiers to guard the Semoma clan while they built their first fort. The King of Manipur had even sent his troops to assist certain clans in the village in their wars against their enemies. As for the plains of Assam to her west, Khonoma was a constant thorn in Assam's flesh for the repeated raids of head hunting and booty hunting. (xi)

The first British expedition to the Naga Hills was led in 1832 AD by

Captain Jenkins and Captain Pemberton. The second expedition took place in 1849, when the British Government learnt that Khonoma had aided men of Mezoma opposed to the Government. After attacking and suppressing Mezoma, they attacked Khonoma to quell what they called "Khonoma defiance". Houses of the Thevo clan and Merhu clan were burnt (xii). The third attack came on the 10th December, 1850, in an expedition led by Captain J. Butler and Major Foquett, Lieutenant Reid and Lieutenant Bivar. In October 1879, Deputy Commissioner Damant was killed at Khonoma. The Kohima garrison was shortly attacked by men of Khonoma, Tsutuonuomia clan, and warriors of Viswema, Chedama, Secuma, Jakhma, Zotshuma, Piphema and Tsiepama. The garrison survived a long siege and then prepared for another assault on Khonoma. The final expedition on Khonoma was in November, 1879 (ibidem).

Surrounded on all sides Khonoma was attacked on 22nd November with troops of 3369 soldiers. Greatly outnumbered by the British Army, the men of Khonoma retreated to their impregnable mountain fort and the battle turned into a siege of the tough little Angami village for four months. On 27th March 1880, a treaty between the representatives of the British Government and the elders of Khonoma brought conclusion to the conflict.

The cold night, hills and hillocks, festivals, animistic faiths and the Naga resistance to the colonial rule and the history of the battles form the bedrock of the novel. The festivals are integral to the hill ecology, e.g.,

On the last day of the festival the villagers followed the two young children appointed to perform the *rhoutho* ritual of seed-sowing. At the fields, the elder pronounced the blessing "My paddy, may you grow up well, though the weeds are abundant, my paddy do you grow around the tree stumps and boulder. It will be the food of generations, the food of wartime, grow bent over with full husked grain." (66)

Both the writers are conspicuously concerned about the history, ecology, ecological theosophy and the turmoil of time against their respective animistic faiths. The two novels are significant additions to the tradition of Indian English fiction and to the ecocritical "toxic consciousness" as they reflect the degradation of pristine virgin ecology.

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