

Building Identity and Writing Resistance in The Legends of Pensam

V.Sirisha¹, Dr. D.Jyothirmai²

¹Research Scholar Department of English, University College of Arts & Commerce,
Adikavi Nannaya University, Rajahmundry

²Professor, Department of English, University College of Arts & Commerce,
Adikavi Nannaya University, Rajahmundry

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Abstract:

This study examines the representation of cultural identity and indigenous resistance in Mamang Dai's *The Legends of Pensam* through the lens of postcolonial theory. It analyzes how the novel foregrounds indigenous consciousness by cultural identity and resistance. Particular attention is given to trace out the intersection of elements of land, memory, spirituality, and identity among the Adi community in their cultural worldview. The analysis demonstrates that Dai transforms storytelling into a powerful instrument of decolonization, enabling the indigenous communities to reclaim their histories, preserve their cultural heritage, and resist colonial and cultural marginalization. The study concludes establishing *The Legends of Pensam* as a significant contribution to the contemporary Indian English literature, that affirms the identity and resistance as two key concepts in the postcolonial discourses of the natives.

Keywords: Cultural Identity; Indigenous Resistance; Mamang Dai; *The Legends of Pensam*; Oral Tradition; Postcolonial Studies.

Introduction

Northeast Indian literature has emerged as a distinctive and influential stream within contemporary Indian English literature, offering rich insights into the histories, cultures, and lived realities of the indigenous communities of the region. For decades, mainstream Indian literary discourse overlooked the voices and experiences of the Northeast, resulting in the marginalization of its diverse cultural heritage. However, writers from the region have of late gained recognition for their literary contributions, which foreground their ethnicity, oral traditions, ecological consciousness, cultural identity, memory, and socio-political realities. Through their narratives, these writers have expanded the scope of Indian English literature by presenting alternative perspectives that challenge dominant constructions of nationhood, history, and identity.

Among the pioneering voices of Northeast Indian literature, Temsula Ao has earned acclaim for works such as *These Hills Called Home* and *Laburnum for My Head*, which vividly portray the cultural traditions, historical experiences, and political complexities of Nagaland. Similarly, Easterine Kire has made significant contributions through novels such as *A Naga Village Remembered* and *When the River Sleeps*, which explore Naga history, indigenous spirituality, and the resilience of tribal communities. Indira Goswami's literary works, including *The Moth-Eaten Howdah of the Tusker* and *Pages Stained with Blood*, examine issues of social injustice, gender, violence, and human suffering with remarkable depth and sensitivity. In addition, writers such as Robin S. Ngangom and Mitra Phukan have enriched Indian English literature by bringing the cultural experiences, linguistic diversity, and historical realities of Northeast India into wider national and international literary discourse.

Collectively, these authors have transformed Northeast Indian literature into an important sphere of cultural expression and intellectual engagement. Their writings preserve indigenous knowledge systems, celebrate oral storytelling traditions, and interrogate colonial and postcolonial narratives that have historically marginalized tribal communities. Consequently, Northeast Indian literature acquired a significant place in the contemporary literary studies, contributing to the broader discussions on concepts of identity, representation, memory, ecology, and cultural resistance.

Among the distinguished voices of Northeast Indian literature, Mamang Dai occupies a prominent position for her evocative portrayal of indigenous life, ecological consciousness, and cultural memory. Born in Arunachal Pradesh, Dai is a poet, novelist, journalist, and former civil servant whose literary works draw extensively upon the myths, traditions, and worldviews of the tribal communities of the region. Her writings preserve indigenous knowledge systems and oral traditions while engaging with themes of identity, displacement, memory, belonging, and cultural resistance. Through her narratives, Dai presents tribal life not as a relic of the past but as a vibrant and evolving cultural reality that negotiates the challenges of modernity and historical marginalization. Dai's work can be considered as the counter discourse to the main stream writing in English that was elitist in its themes as the tribal communities and their ways of life were relegated as the colonizer ignored the colonized.

Dai's literary style is distinguished by its lyrical prose, symbolic imagery, and deep engagement with oral storytelling traditions. She seamlessly interweaves myth, folklore, history, and contemporary experience to construct narratives that emphasize the inseparable relationship between people, land, and collective memory. In her fiction, nature transcends the role of a mere physical setting and emerges as a living cultural presence that shapes the spiritual, social, and historical identity of indigenous communities. By blending poetic

language with indigenous sensibilities, Dai transforms English into a powerful medium for articulating tribal consciousness, ecological philosophy, and cultural identity.

Her major literary works include *The Legends of Pensam*, *River Poems*, *Stupid Cupid*, *The Black Hill*, and *Escaping the Land*. Among these, *The Legends of Pensam* stands as one of her most significant contributions to Indian English literature. The novel portrays the cultural life of the Adi community through an intricate tapestry of myths, legends, memories, and everyday experiences. *Pensam* itself is envisioned as a symbolic "in-between" world where the boundaries between myth and reality, memory and history, and the past and the present remain fluid. Through this narrative space, Dai foregrounds indigenous identity and the profound spiritual relationship between human beings and the natural world. As the narrator observes, "The land remembers everything" (Dai), suggesting that the land functions as a living repository of history, memory, and cultural continuity. This powerful image underscores the central role of landscape in preserving indigenous identity and collective consciousness.

Consequently, Mamang Dai's writings have become an important contribution to postcolonial and indigenous literary studies in India. By recovering marginalized histories, celebrating oral traditions, and foregrounding indigenous epistemologies, her works challenge dominant colonial narratives and affirm the cultural resilience of tribal communities. Through her distinctive narrative voice, Dai demonstrates that storytelling itself serves as an enduring act of cultural preservation, historical reclamation, and indigenous resistance.

Glimpse of the Novel

The Legends of Pensam is set in the Adi tribal region of Arunachal Pradesh, a landscape characterized by majestic mountains, flowing rivers, dense forests, and a rich tapestry of myths, legends, and spiritual beliefs. In this work, Mamang Dai presents the cultural world of the Adi community by weaving together oral traditions, folklore, ancestral memories, and everyday experiences. Rather than following a conventional linear narrative, the novel adopts an episodic structure that reflects the rhythms of oral storytelling. Myths, rituals, personal recollections, and communal histories are intricately interwoven, creating a narrative that resembles the collective memory of a community rather than a chronological sequence of events. The narrative voice is simultaneously personal and communal, allowing the storyteller to recount individual experiences while articulating the shared consciousness and cultural values of the Adi people. This dual perspective enables Dai to serve as both narrator and cultural mediator, introducing indigenous worldviews to a wider readership while preserving the authenticity and intimacy of an insider's perspective.

Beyond documenting the customs and traditions of the Adi community, *The Legends of Pensam* functions as a powerful affirmation of indigenous identity and knowledge systems in the face of cultural homogenization and the pressures of modernity. The work celebrates

the continuity of tribal beliefs, ecological wisdom, and oral traditions, demonstrating that storytelling itself is an enduring means of preserving cultural heritage. Through its distinctive narrative form, the novel emphasizes that memory, myth, and lived experience are inseparable components of indigenous history and identity.

Although composed of a series of interconnected stories, *The Legends of Pensam* achieves the unity and coherence of a novel through recurring characters, shared cultural experiences, and the continuity of family and community life across generations. The text is organized into four major sections "A Diary of the World," "Songs of the Rhapsodist," "Daughters of the Village," and "A Matter of Time." Each section contains interconnected narratives that collectively portray the cultural, spiritual, and historical landscape of the Adi people. By linking these stories through common themes of memory, land, kinship, and identity, Dai constructs a multidimensional narrative that celebrates the resilience of indigenous culture and its enduring relationship with nature.

Theoretical Framework

This study adopts a postcolonial theoretical framework to examine the representation of cultural identity and indigenous resistance in Mamang Dai's *The Legends of Pensam*. Usually Postcolonial theory provides a critical perspective of the impact of colonialism on culture, language, identity, and systems of representation. It evaluates how the colonized and marginalized communities negotiate their identities, preserve their cultures, resisting ideological domination, to reclaim their historical and cultural voices through counter discourses. Within this framework, literature transforms into an important site where suppressed histories are reawakened, indigenous epistemologies are validated, and dominant colonial narratives are questioned.

In the context Dai's writings, postcolonial theory offers an effective lens to examine the experiences of the indigenous communities of Northeast India and their continuing efforts to preserve their cultural heritage in the era of modernization, globalization, and historical marginalization. Dai's narratives showcase the cultural values, oral traditions, spiritual beliefs, and ecological consciousness of the Adi community, thereby affirming indigenous identities that have often remained absent from mainstream literary and historical discourses. Her fiction demonstrates that the survival of the culture depends not only upon political resistance but also upon the preservation of collective memory, and ancestral worldviews.

Further the theoretical foundation of this study is informed by the contributions of prominent postcolonial scholars such as Homi K. Bhabha, Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak, and Ngũgĩ wa Thiong'o. Bhabha's concept of cultural identity and hybridity highlights the ways in which identities are continually negotiated within complex historical and cultural contexts. Spivak's notion of the subaltern emphasizes the importance of recovering marginalized voices that have been excluded from dominant narratives, while Ngũgĩ wa Thiong'o's

advocacy for the decolonization of language underscores the role of literature in preserving indigenous cultures and resisting linguistic domination. These theoretical perspectives provide an appropriate framework for interpreting Dai's literary representation of tribal life and cultural resilience.

Through its characters, myths, oral narratives, rituals, ecological symbolism, and indigenous worldview, *The Legends of Pensam* illustrates the resilience of tribal identity and the subtle yet powerful forms of resistance employed by indigenous communities against cultural marginalization. The novel portrays storytelling as a vital cultural practice through which ancestral knowledge, collective memory, and traditional values are transmitted across generations. By preserving indigenous stories, languages, customs, and spiritual beliefs, Dai transforms literature into an act of cultural preservation and resistance. Consequently, *The Legends of Pensam* emerges not merely as a literary narrative but as a powerful tool of assertion of indigenous identity, cultural continuity, and historical self-representation within the broader discourse of postcolonial literature.

Cultural Identity

Cultural identity constitutes one of the central concerns of this study. Postcolonial theorists argue that identity is not a fixed or static construct but is continuously shaped by history, memory, language, culture, and lived social experience. Bhabha contends that cultural identity emerges through processes of negotiation within spaces of hybridity, where communities respond to colonial encounters while preserving their distinctive cultural traditions. In *The Legends of Pensam*, Mamang Dai presents the Adi tribal community as one whose identity is deeply rooted in nature, oral traditions, ritual practices, and ancestral beliefs. Through myths, legends, memories, and everyday experiences, the novelist attempts to preserve indigenous identity while resisting the homogenizing pressures of modernity and cultural domination.

The cultural identity of the Adi community is expressed through the novel's characters, narrators, landscapes, and everyday practices. Dai portrays Pensam as a living cultural space where rivers, forests, mountains, spirits, and human beings co-exist in an inseparable relationship. The repeated emphasis on storytelling, village customs, and collective memory illustrates how cultural knowledge is transmitted across generations through oral tradition rather than written history. The unnamed narrator's visit to her mother's ancestral village in the Duyang Valley, referred to as the "Village of the Widows," symbolizes a return to cultural origins and ancestral memory. Describing the sacred relationship between land and existence, the narrator observes, "In the beginning there was water, and the spirit of the river moved over the land" (Dai 18). This statement reflects the indigenous worldview in which nature is regarded as sacred and forms the foundation of human existence. Unlike colonial perspectives that reduce land to a mere material, property or economic resource, Dai presents the landscape as a living repository of identity,

spirituality, and cultural continuity. Consequently, cultural identity is portrayed in the novel is inseparable from ecological consciousness and communal memory.

Equally important to the construction of cultural identity is the concept of indigenous epistemology. Indigenous epistemology refers to systems of knowledge grounded in relationships with land, spirituality, community, oral tradition, and ecological practices. In the novel, knowledge is transmitted not through formal institutions or written records but through myths, rituals, dreams, ancestral memories, and the lived experiences of the community. Elders, storytellers, women, and village customs function as custodians of this knowledge, reflecting the indigenous understanding that wisdom is relational and encompasses both the human and the natural worlds.

The significance of ritual as a cultural practice is illustrated through the episode of Hoxo, the mysterious boy who falls from the sky, and his narration of the tragic story of Karyan Togum's family. Speaking about the illness of Togum's young son, Hoxo explains, "The serpent ritual had to be performed. But sometimes it is a matter of time, too" (Dai 23). The elders believe that the child's suffering results from Togum's killing of a python and that only the proper ritual can restore harmony between human beings and the spiritual world. This episode demonstrates the Adi community's profound respect for nature, ancestral spirits, and traditional healing practices. Dai suggests that rituals are not merely ceremonial customs but essential cultural practices that sustain harmony, continuity, and collective well-being. The reference to "time" further implies that these rituals are deeply connected with natural rhythms, destiny, and intergenerational wisdom. Thus, ritual becomes a powerful expression of the community's cultural identity, preserving its beliefs, values, and heritage despite the changing realities of the modern world.

The novel also emphasizes indigenous spiritual beliefs through its portrayal of customs of funeral and ancestral rituals. In the section "*Daughters of the Village*," the narrator reflects on her mother's burial, stating, "My mother was buried with her head pointing west, so that when her soul rose, she would wake up to face the east and walk into the house of the sun" (Dai 87). This passage reveals the community's belief in the continuity of life after death and the soul's spiritual journey. The east, associated with sunrise, symbolizes hope, renewal, rebirth, and spiritual awakening, while the "house of the sun" represents a sacred destination where the departed attain peace. Such beliefs illustrate the intimate relationship between spirituality, ritual, and cultural identity, reinforcing the community's reverence for ancestral traditions and sacred cosmology.

Several episodes throughout the novel further reinforce this indigenous worldview. Forests, rivers, mountains, animals, and spirits are not depicted as passive elements of the landscape but as living presences that participate in human existence. Likewise, the narrative structure itself mirrors the fluidity of oral storytelling, allowing memories, myths, and

historical experiences to move freely across generations rather than following a rigid chronological sequence. Dai's recurring assertion that "The land remembers everything" (Dai 12) and the later observation that "The land remembers everything; the hills keep the secrets of the ancestors" (Dai 67) symbolize the inseparable relationship between land, memory, history, and identity. These images challenge Western notions of linear history by presenting the landscape as a living archive that safeguards collective memory and ancestral knowledge. Language also functions as a powerful marker of cultural identity in the novel. Dai incorporates indigenous idioms, local expressions, and oral speech patterns into English, thereby subverting the colonial language into a medium capable of expressing tribal consciousness and ecological philosophy. Her distinctive narrative style preserves the rhythms of oral storytelling while giving voice to indigenous experiences that have long remained marginalized within mainstream literary discourse. In *"The Words of Women,"* Arsi expresses her aspirations by saying, "Oh, so many things, sing, fly, live properly, for instance. Speak English" (Dai 75). Similarly, the expression, "Aiee! Aie, where did they meet each other? Are they Breetees migluns?" (Dai 91), illustrates Dai's deliberate incorporation of indigenous linguistic expressions into English narration. Rather than abandoning native speech, Dai reshapes English to accommodate tribal idioms and cultural meanings, thereby resisting linguistic homogenization while preserving indigenous identity.

Thus, through its rich portrayal of myths, rituals, oral traditions, ecological consciousness, and indigenous knowledge systems, *The Legends of Pensam* celebrates the cultural identity of the tribal communities of Arunachal Pradesh. The novel demonstrates that land, memory, language, spirituality, and tradition collectively shape the worldview of the Adi people and sustain their cultural identity and continuity across generations. By foregrounding indigenous epistemologies and challenging colonial representations of history and identity, Mamang Dai establishes *The Legends of Pensam* as a significant contribution to postcolonial and indigenous literary studies.

Indigenous Resistance

Indigenous resistance constitutes another significant dimension of this study. In postcolonial literature, resistance extends beyond political struggle to encompass the preservation of culture, language, memory, and traditional knowledge systems. Rather than confronting colonial power solely through direct opposition, indigenous communities often resist cultural domination by safeguarding their histories, customs, spiritual beliefs, and collective identities. Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak's influential question, "Can the subaltern speak?" foregrounds the historical silencing of marginalized communities within dominant colonial narratives. In *The Legends of Pensam*, Mamang Dai responds to this concern by allowing the indigenous people of Pensam to narrate their own histories, beliefs, and lived experiences. Instead of being represented through the perspective of an outsider or colonial observer, the people of Pensam emerge as active narrators of their cultural memory, thereby reclaiming their voices and asserting their identity.

This study also draws upon Ngũgĩ wa Thiong'o's concept of the decolonization of language. Ngũgĩ argues that language is inseparable from culture and that colonial languages often suppress indigenous modes of thought and expression. Ngugi emphasizes that writing in the indigenous language is inevitable to decolonize one's own mind as well as language. Yet Dai writes in English, she reshapes the language by incorporating indigenous rhythms, oral storytelling techniques, local idioms, and mythic imagery. Her narrative style reflects the speech patterns and ecological worldview of the Adi community. She subverts English from a colonial medium into a vehicle for indigenous expression. By adapting the language of masters' to convey tribal consciousness and cultural values, Dai challenges linguistic domination as she owns English as a medium to validate indigenous epistemologies and traditional systems of knowledge of her community.

Further resistance in *The Legends of Pensam* is subtle yet profound. It is manifested through the community's unwavering commitment to oral traditions, ritual practices, ancestral beliefs, and collective memory despite the increasing influence of modernization and external cultural forces. Storytelling functions as one of the most significant forms of resistance because it preserves histories that remain absent from official colonial records. Dai emphasizes this continuity through the observation, "The stories of the village travel from one generation to another like the river that never forgets its course" (Dai 43). The comparison of stories to a river symbolizes the uninterrupted transmission of indigenous knowledge across generations. In this way, oral narratives become enduring acts of cultural preservation that resist historical erasure and protect the collective identity of the community. Similarly, the statement "Old stories refuse to disappear" (Dai 95) affirms the enduring power of oral tradition to sustain history and cultural memory despite changing social circumstances. In *"A Diary of the World,"* the village elders proclaim, "There are men and women, guardians of history" (Dai 31), emphasizing the collective responsibility of community members to preserve ancestral knowledge and cultural traditions. History, in Dai's narrative, is not preserved in written archives but in the memories, rituals, and stories transmitted from one generation to another. This communal approach to historical preservation becomes a powerful form of indigenous resistance against cultural marginalization.

Women occupy a particularly significant position in safeguarding indigenous traditions and cultural continuity. In the episode *"Pinyar, the Widow,"* Pinyar explains to Mona the preparation of the sacred drink *si-yi*, observing that "Only women were allowed to handle it" (Dai 28). This statement highlights women's authority in protecting sacred customs and transmitting traditional knowledge. Throughout the novel, women function not merely as participants in community life but as custodians of ritual practices, cultural values, and collective memory. Dai also portrays women's emotional experiences—including grief, longing, resilience, and hope—as integral to the cultural consciousness of the community.

Their personal narratives become expressions of collective identity, reinforcing the continuity of indigenous traditions across generations.

The voices of women also articulate resistance to cultural displacement and social change. In *"Daughters of the Village,"* Arsi questions the value of her surroundings by asking, "Is this a place to live?" (Dai 74), before expressing her profound dissatisfaction: "I am unhappy. Unhappy, unhappy, unhappy!" (Dai 75). Although these statements reveal personal frustration, they simultaneously reflect the broader anxieties of a community confronting cultural transformation. Dai portrays these voices not as expressions of defeat but as manifestations of emotional resilience, revealing the tensions between tradition and modernity while affirming the enduring strength of indigenous identity.

Moreover, the intimate relationship between the community and its ancestral land is another powerful expression of indigenous resistance. During a cultural celebration, women sing:

"These are our arrows,

This, our poison.

This, the warrior's art,

These, our song of love" (Dai 115).

The imagery of arrows, poison, and warrior's art symbolize courage, survival, and the determination to protect ancestral land and cultural traditions. At the same time, the phrase "song of love" expresses the community's emotional and spiritual attachment to the landscape that defines their identity. Similarly, the character Nenem's decision to choose her homeland over personal love reflects the primacy of cultural belonging and collective responsibility. In Dai's narrative, the land is never portrayed merely as physical territory; rather, it is a sacred space that embodies history, identity, spirituality, and communal memory. Consequently, the defense of the land becomes inseparable from the preservation of indigenous culture itself.

Dai further explores indigenous resistance through the community's response to the forces of modernization. In the section *"A Matter of Time,"* particularly in the story *"The Road,"* the arrival of development symbolizes external intervention into traditional tribal life. The villagers openly reject the changes imposed upon them, declaring:

"They did not welcome strangers. They did not want to join hands with government. We are not seekers of fortune, they said. We are not seekers of words. We are not seekers of a new identity. Leave us alone" (Dai 158).

These words express the community's determination to preserve its own cultural values and identity rather than assimilate into externally imposed social and political structures. Their rejection of "fortune," "words," and "new identity" symbolizes resistance to cultural assimilation, governmental intrusion, and the erosion of traditional ways of life. The plea to be "left alone" represents not isolation but a conscious assertion of cultural autonomy

and self-determination, reflecting the indigenous desire to preserve ancestral heritage against the encroaching forces of modernization.

Ultimately, *The Legends of Pensam* presents indigenous resistance as a multidimensional process rooted in the preservation of oral traditions, ritual practices, language, spirituality, ecological consciousness, and collective memory. Mamang Dai demonstrates that resistance need not always take the form of political confrontation or armed struggle; it can also be expressed through the protection of cultural identity, ancestral beliefs, and indigenous knowledge systems. By foregrounding storytelling, women's voices, sacred customs, and the community's profound attachment to the land, Dai portrays the resilience of indigenous culture in the face of historical marginalization and contemporary social change. Through her creative adaptation of the English language to accommodate indigenous expressions and worldviews, she successfully reclaims literary space for marginalized communities and affirms the enduring strength, dignity, and continuity of indigenous identity within postcolonial literature.

Conclusion

The study concludes that Mamang Dai, through *The Legends of Pensam*, successfully portrays the richness of indigenous culture and the resilience of tribal identity within a postcolonial context. The novel highlights how oral traditions, myths, ecological consciousness, and collective memory function as powerful forms of cultural preservation and resistance against historical erasure and colonial marginalisation. Dai's use of language, narrative structure, and indigenous worldview transforms storytelling into an act of decolonisation, allowing subaltern voices to reclaim their histories and identities. By blending English with oral storytelling rhythms and local sensibilities, Dai transforms language into a medium of cultural identity and indigenous resistance. The representation of women as custodians of tradition further strengthens the continuity of cultural knowledge across generations. The narrative structure, characters, and natural imagery in the novel collectively reflect a postcolonial resistance to cultural marginalisation by reclaiming indigenous voices, histories, and epistemologies from dominant colonial discourse. The novel not only documents tribal life but also reclaims indigenous history, identity, and memory within a postcolonial framework. Thus, *The Legends of Pensam* emerges as an important postcolonial text that preserves indigenous epistemologies and affirms the significance of cultural identity and resistance in contemporary literature.

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