

Impact of Modernisation in Mamang Dai's *The Legends of Pensam*

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Abstract

The research article “Impact of Modernisation in Mamang Dai's *The Legends of Pensam*” emphasizes the need for consideration of the tribal cultures that are fading from the face of the earth. The study expounds the significance of knowing the rationales behind the misconceptions against the tribal societies who are hardly recognized as an integral part of the globe. The tribal communities in India are losing their traditional cultures due to the growing modernisation that followed colonialism. The challenges confronted by the tribes of the northeast particularly the Adis of Arunachal Pradesh during the colonial and the postcolonial epochs are accentuated in this study. The lives of the tribal and the indigenous communities are made vulnerable and the stance of Dai is highlighted in the study through the concept of postdevelopmentalism that has some consideration for the fourth world people.

Keywords: northeast tribes – fading tribal cultures – postdevelopmentalism – modernisation – marginalisation.

Mamang Dai is a Northeast Indian tribal writer belonging to the Adi tribe residing in the state of Arunachal Pradesh that shelters twenty six main tribes and more than a hundred smaller sub-tribes. The Northeast part of India is a home to nearly three hundred tribal communities. The Northeast tribal communities are sidelined and their writings remained unheard. The contemporary northeast Indian writers with their effective writings are making their voices heard. Dai writes poems and short stories rich with the tribal folklore of her land. She has authored non-fictional works: *Arunachal Pradesh: The Hidden Land* and *Mountain Harvest: The Food of Arunachal Pradesh*; three novels: *The Legends of Pensam*, *Stupid Cupid*, and *The Black Hill*; two volumes of poetry: *River Poems* and *The Balm of Time*; and illustrated books of

folklore *The Sky Queen* and *Once Upon A Moontime: From the Magical Story World of Arunachal Pradesh* and a well-known folktale retold as *Hambreelmai's Loom*.

Dai's *The Legends of Pensam* records the perception of Adis towards the colonial intrusion and the modifications done to the people and their land. This intrusion into tribal cultures was possible due to the ethnocentric attitude present amongst the colonists and its influence on some of the natives that provided opportunities for the colonists. The tribesmen had always given a tough fight to the colonists by preventing them from entering the tribal world. Once the colonists set their foot on other countries they manipulate and silence the native authorities. Dai explicates the interference made by the British officers in the affairs of the native people. The colonists establish their power by controlling the native inhabitants and when the natives react to it, the colonists punish the natives and compel them to abide by their commands as delineated by Dai through the murder of the British officer Noel Williamson along with "forty-seven sepoys and coolies" in the tribal village of Arunachal Pradesh that lead to a disaster into the lives of the Adi tribal community where the tribesmen were killed as retaliation (48).

In this Komsing incident the British officer named Noel Williamson is murdered for intruding the tribal norms. The rationales behind the attack are reported in the novel to be the communication gap or the insult done by an Englishman to the tribal man. There is also a scandal that it is the affair between an English officer and tribal woman years ago that provoked the murder. The villagers said that the love for the Englishman made the local woman "reckless, fearless like a hawk, and the tribe meted out terrible punishment in retaliation" (48). This massacre resulted in the punitive expedition of 1912 that ordered the murderers to be imprisoned in the Andaman Islands. A memorial stone is raised in memory of Noel Williamson. The stone is still looked after as the British had instructed. These incidents show the alterations done to the tribal lifestyle through establishing colonial power.

The colonists open up the land for visitors and invite troubles to the tribal people. Dai delineates in *The Legends of Pensam* that "now the whole area had become a free trade zone with land and river convoys, officers, traders and potters moving in all directions . . . Everyone was flocking to this new destination which was now the recognised seat of power" (91). Initially they invade the land by giving trivial reasons with strong secret missions where the villagers at first agreed to provide some land for the officers but the Britishers have established their territory by setting up permanent camps on river banks by bargaining with the villagers. This is the tricky attitude of the colonizers who take advantage over the innocent natives. This is the formula applied by the westerners to expand their territory.

The colonisers manipulate the native people and their land to meet their needs. This is how colonialism paved way to modernisation for they bring in modern technologies into the native lands and alter the whole of the lifestyle which affects the traditional practices and bruise the indigenous systems in all ways as explicated in the novel. The British officers decided to build a road for their armies to fight against the Japanese soldiers and instructed the tribal chiefs to provide able-bodied men to help in the road construction. The tribesmen and the animals

involved in the road construction are demanded hard labour and are not denied mercy as detailed in the novel:

The migluns were terrifying in their energy and determination. In the lashing rain and wet earth that buried men up to their waists they drove elephants strained and quivered to the shouts of their mahouts, slipped, struggled, knelt, struggled on, and many of the poor animals lost their footing and hurtled off the mountainside bellowing like mythical beasts with their eyes rolled up skywards . . . In the swampy valleys men died like flies, shivering with fever and fear. (39)

The men returned from the place after three years enthusiastically talk of the sound produced by the cargo trucks and bulldozers and the shouts of men. The road spanned more than thousand miles across three countries has taken the lives of many as the narrator reports reading somewhere in a library that no other road in the world has taken as high a toll of human lives as this one; it had been dubbed “a-man-a-mile road” (40). With the alterations made on the environment the old landmarks of the tribal villages are changing. This is another transformation that adds on to the existing problem of the tribal communities. The town named Pigo, the oldest settlement in the region that became the first choice of the Britishers. People here walk in the paths of the elephants through the forests but after the modifications done, the animals wandered remembering their ancient routes. In this way that the modernization disturbed the wildlife and human life to a greater extent. Thus it is argued that these sorts of development brought calamities into tribal lifestyle that makes the villagers restless for these issues are new to them because they have never been subjected to changes by the outsiders to this level.

The road is one of the developments brought to the tribal world but in reality they are able to lead life even without progressions. The road according to the villagers is inauspicious for it has brought disasters along with it that ruins the peace of the villagers by annoying them. The road invites troubles to the people and it is mentioned that there is a mad woman on riverside throwing rock at the people who travel the road and there are stories on the red pool red with ghostly fish that drove strong men to acts of murderous violence. The tribal people were able to survive without all these gadgets brought into their lives. The developments are viewed as a threat to the people due to its vulnerability for the outsiders.

Being an agricultural community the Adis consider granaries sacred and it is offensive to enter one without the consent of the owner as they are an asset to the Adis. The doors of granaries are broken and the precious things stored there are stolen. Modernisation violated the tribal norms and made tribal lives vulnerable to the intrusion of alien culture. The tribal people grieve over their traditions and landscapes getting altered. Dai's *The Legends of Pensam* documents the transformations made to the villages as “a curtain had fallen over the old villages. What was once sacred, the old sense of joy, was being lost” (163). The degradation done to the environment hurts their cultures connected to it. The Adis believe that their ancestral spirits reside on treetops as Hoxo mentions in the novel. He compares the past with that of the present that offends the feelings of his people since the modernity intrudes their tribal belief and customs. Hoxo describes that the spirits of ancestors that dwelt in these high and secret places

fell with the trees as “they were homeless, and so they went away. And everything has changed since then. The canopy of shelter and tradition had fallen” (42). In this way the tribal traditional values are bruised and manipulated by other cultures.

It is their habitat which is totally altered by the foreign powers to construct roads involving the tribesmen and animals forcing them to work day and night regardless of the bad weather. The road was built by carving the big caves in the forest. Thus was the colonial power invading the tribal territory and commanding and enslaving the tribal people. The village elders agree to help the colonists with men power and this brought suspicions among the tribal people since the general feeling at the time was that the elders had been brainwashed by the colonists.

The indigenous communities are trying to cope with the changes that affect the mere existence of traditional practices. The tribal people once had been self-sufficient and become saviours of their land and its culture as Hoxo says that they “need courage and faith in the face of change. That is all we can do” (43). The people resist against modernisation that is brought into their lands. From Hoxo’s stories, the narrator gives a wider picture of the changes brought into the tribal world. Hoxo himself being the son of the village chief knows the history of his land. Currently his people are witnessing the mutilations done to their culture that is transformed in the face of modernisation. The tribal people themselves are innocent of the value their land withholds. Hoxo laments over the fading traditional culture which was once unadulterated by the outsiders. The narrator in the novel expounds the impact of development that has altered the age old landmarks of the village

The tribal way of living gets shattered amidst the socio-economic upheavals that end up altering the ethnic cultures in multidimensional forms. The concept of exalting one culture and looking down upon other cultures is called cultural ethnocentrism. The post-modernist anthropologists Katy Gardner and David Lewis in *Anthropology, Development and the Post-Modern Challenge* describe that modernization is “open to criticism on virtually every front. Its assumption that all change inevitably follows the western model is breathtakingly ethnocentric and empirically incorrect” (14). Colonialism played a vast role in replacing the indigenes with its modernity that was based on popularizing the Eurocentric concepts believing that the Western rule was the best thing that ever happened to the natives as Norman G. Owen says in “Examining Colonialism: A Tool of Oppression, Modernization?”. He further comments that the colonisers oppress the people of the colonised nations and exploit their wealth by enslaving them as it sets the stage for capitalism. Modernisation is merely hypothesized on western ideas that were once unknown to the third and fourth world countries. Globalization and urbanisation has springs from modernization is actually viewed as the by-products of westernization.

Literature made by the people who are marginalised on the grounds of ethnicity, race, caste, language and gender are categorized under Fourth World Literature. It reflects the cultural and socio-economic circumstances that distress the life of the fourth world people. Fourth World people include the Tribes and Dalits of India, First nations of Canada, Native people of America, Aboriginals of Australia, and Maoris of New Zealand. The Fourth World nations mainly refer to the most underdeveloped regions in the world that are poverty stricken and economically

troubled. Fourth World Literature details the ongoing marginalisation done to the above mentioned communities that are subjugated by the imperial power in the name of progress and development.

The postdevelopmental concept voices out the important criticism of modernisation from a postcolonial angle. The postdevelopmental concept arose through the works of scholars like Arturo Escobar, Wolfgang Sachs, James Ferguson, Gustavo Esteva, Majid Rahnema, Gilbert Rist and Serge Latouche. These leading members of the post-development school accuse the concept of development for blocking certain communities as Latouche defines in *In the Wake of the Affluent Society* that the West is “a steamroller crushing all cultures in its path” (22). This is evident through the concept of modernisation applied on the indigenous societies. According to the postdevelopment scholars the principles of development in itself is prejudiced and defective so the only solution they offer is to get rid of the entire form as Erica Prosser explicates in “Applied Post-Development Theory: Case Study of Enda Graf-Sahel” that “rejecting “development” because of its attempts to eradicate indigenous culture, impose Western lifestyle and change the people’s perceptions of themselves” (35).

The postdevelopment school of thought accuses the models of development to be ethnocentric and in most of the cases they are Eurocentric because they are deliberately exterminating the indigenous cultures. In the name of modernisation the native cultures are jeopardised in numerous ways as the process of development is more of loss than beneficial to the indigenous societies for it destructs their traditional lifestyle. The modernity is built on the termination of their habitats and culture. The development that benefits the indigenous societies could be welcomed but a process that profits the privileged societies by usurping the treasures of indigenous communities cannot be encouraged. As Erica Prosser expounds in the article “Applied Post-Development Theory: Case Study of Enda Graf Sahel”:

Postdevelopment theories blame the West for imposing its culture on indigenous peoples in attempts to demonstrate the “underdevelopment” of the community. With the invasion of Western culture, locals are exposed to what they do not have, and are subsequently labelled as “underdeveloped”. Rather than accepting the continuous failure of post war development projects, post-development theorists express a new view of community revival. They call for alternatives to development, while advocating cultural sensitivity and local participation in initiative planning”. (43).

Thus the post-development theorists find out the problem and also provide a proper solution to the issue.

The traditional practices are fading with the rise of modernisation which demeans tribal and the native cultures. The modernisation spread by the colonisers during the colonial period sounded the death knell of many indigenous cultures in various parts of the world. The colonisers promoted their culture, faith and language into the native lands by side lining the traditional lifestyle of the native communities that result in either blemishing the originality or transforming them to a point where it becomes inconspicuous to even identify the changes as Dai defines in

her *Stupid Cupid* that talks about the “citified” lifestyle of her tribal people residing in Delhi where the characters embrace the westernized way of life (22).

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