

Nativism and Tribal Ethos: Examining the Adi Life-World in *The Legends of Pensam*

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Abstract: *The Legends of Pensam* is a novel written as a collection of short stories that depict the tribal life of the Adi tribe of the Siang Valley. It recounts stories from different generations, which become historical accounts of a specific tribe living in an area spanning Arunachal Pradesh and Tibet. The paper examines these short stories through a nativist approach, situating the text in its context and then analysing its cultural and regional affiliations. A nativist approach helps us to examine and understand the indigenous and local way of life without interference from any foreign critical framework. The paper will study the language, myths, and legends of different clans and tribal communities using nativist criticism, first propounded by Balchandra Nemade. Using Nativism as a critical tool will help preserve the essence of tribal life in literature, such as local terms, local food and practices.

Keywords: Nativism, Tribal Literature, Language, Indian Literary Criticism, Adi Tribe

Introduction

Linguistic and cultural diversity are important features of Indian civilisation, and the tribes of India form a crucial part of this diversity. The tribal culture of India, with its traditions and practices, permeates every aspect of Indian culture and civilisation. Tribal history, myths and legends constitute a rich heritage of India that should be preserved for generations as a crucial alternative history. Mamang Dai is a renowned poet, novelist, and journalist. She was the first woman from Arunachal Pradesh to join the Indian Administrative Service but left the civil service to focus on literature and journalism. Born into the Adi tribe of Arunachal Pradesh, her writings highlight the cultural identity, indigenous traditions, and lifestyle of the Adi people. Since Adi is a non-written language, she writes in English. She defined that in the Adi language, the word 'Pensam' means 'in-between'. That is the 'middle or the middle ground', or it can also be the 'hidden spaces of 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" (*Legends of Pensam*). The author used the word 'Pensam' to illustrate not the extremes of two worlds, but the blending of different lives people lead—combining spirit and human, myth and reality, tradition and modernity, as well as oral and written cultures. As the Adi people communicate orally in their language, she recorded their stories and myths in English to introduce this tribe to the wider world. Yet, the Adi tribe is unaware of such binaries; there is no difference for them between a spiritual and real world. Their world is surrounded by huge mountains, dense forests, rivers and distinct clans within the same tribe. Their identity belongs to their lands, customs, and the rituals they perform routinely.

The novel's narrative is not linear, but it contains stories told by different tribal people at different points in time. The narrative itself makes it different from the typical mainstream novel, which generally has a definite plot, character and timeline. In *Legend of Pensams*, the art of storytelling is held in the utmost value. This is the most natural way for the Adi tribe to remember their past and ancestors. Dai tried to preserve the oral culture of the Adi tribes and their animistic faith, which is intertwined with forest ecology and cohabitation with the natural world, by documenting their native lives. *The Legend of Pensam* is a repository of cultural memory for generations to come; it represents cultural heterogeneity even within the Adi tribe. It shows the distinct varieties of clans, which differ from one village to another. Each clan has its own cultural practices and rituals. Homogenising the whole tribal group as one, without acknowledging differences in their customs and rituals, is harmful and will lead to the extinction of different tribes in India. Reading this novel in its context, considering its local place and time, its surroundings, the value tribal people place on land, hills, rivers, and each other, their beliefs in spirits, and their encounter with Britishers (migluns), is important because that is how it will become a text about tribal people. That is how people will understand the Adi tribe's traditions. When a novel is read within its original social, cultural, and temporal context, without imposing different Western critical frameworks, it truly functions as an alternate history. This approach helps to understand tribal values and beliefs authentically, without alterations or judgments.

Nativism is an alternative approach to criticism, not a well-developed theory but a movement that gained momentum in the 1980s through the writings of Balchandra Nemade and GN Devy. Nemade is a Marathi writer and critic who discussed Deshivad/Nativism in his works and initiated the debate on Nativism. His article, "Sahityateel Desiyata", originally published in 1983, defined Nativism as "the establishment of one's right to exist as one is", and he says that "Nativeness" is the

natural state of sustaining the status quo; thus “, Nativism” is a temporary phase of “nativeness”. He emphasised indigenous critical frameworks and literature based on native land and linguistic group. He argues, “The greatness of literary movement or an author is not determined by international standards; it is determined by how many functions ranging from spiritual elevation to linguistic experimentation it serves” (237). According to Nemade, Universalism is not uniformity but recognising the distinctions between literary works of different regions. “An open-minded appreciation of work as it is, in its own context, is what is expected in true universalism” (240). Native elements are present in every text, and even “international” literature cannot exist without native reference. In comparative literary studies, no comparison of two international literary texts is possible without a native style, movement or trend to compare with another native style, trend, or movement. The comparison will be superficial if native elements are ignored. Nemade claims that “Internationalism without nativism as its basis is impossible because Nativism is a multi-centred, descriptive and real concept, whereas internationalism is an artificial and parasitic concept”. (246) Nativism is implicit in all kinds of works produced in any culture. So, indigenous or tribal literature flourishes more in its native culture; it does not need international standards for recognition, but it stands tall in its own lands and linguistic groups (235). Nemade focuses on location, and the relation of land with people’s belief and culture, time and region as the principles of nativism. He emphasised reading more local texts in their own contexts to understand a region's knowledge systems.

GN Devy, in “After Amnesia: Tradition and Change in Indian Literary Criticism”, criticised Indian writers’ unnecessary obsession with theorisation, which he argued is a side effect of colonisation. We tend to study every text through borrowed Eurocentric frameworks without acknowledging India’s plurality, diverse indigenous traditions, and multilingualism. He works to protect indigenous, tribal, and endangered languages from extinction, and he urges Indian writers to develop a home-grown critical framework grounded in our own vernaculars and local terms, so literature in indigenous languages can be represented in the Indian literary canon and read widely. Romanticising the past is revivalism; Devy opposes revivalism or the hegemony of Sanskritisation. He calls for a criticism that is indigenous and inclusive of bhasha tradition. According to him, Nativism is the “language-specific way of looking at literature” (120). He defined *Desivad* as “going to the roots”, “looking at things as they are, from the perspective that has emerged within the cultural and historical context of those things is ‘Desivad’ ”. It neither asks you to ‘go back’ nor to ‘move forward’. It only asks you to see it in its entirety” (9586, Malhotra).

Research Gap and methodology

Many theories and critical concepts, such as feminism, ecocriticism, and decolonisation, have been applied to analyse the novel *The Legends of Pensam*. Still, a gap remains in understanding the novel through the nativist approach of Indian Literary Criticism. This paper examines the novel through close analytical reading and situates it within its cultural context through a nativist reading. To analyse a work of literature using a nativist critical approach, one follows criteria that include the cultural, social, local and linguistic aspects of any literature. It is not concerned with stylistic or formalistic frameworks but examines regional and temporal features of the period when the text was written.

The Legend of Pensam - Concept of Geopietty: The ‘code of land’

In the first part of the novel, we are introduced to ‘Hoxo’, ‘the boy who fell from the sky’; he is carried in a basket through green trees, and his fall is described

in relation to nature. Everybody believed he was born from the Sky. Then, in Yabgo Village, Togum killed a serpent with his gun, resulting in his son Kepi becoming severely ill; Hoxo was called to perform the serpent ritual to restore the child's health. So, the natural habitat that surrounds the Adi tribe affects them; human beings and the environment are interdependent. In the section 'The Songs of Rhapsodist', the shaman in the Komsing Village explained to the villagers, "From nothingness we have come to be born under the stars, and almighty Doni-polo, the sun and the moon, whose light shines on all equally, is an invisible force that guides each one of us" (57). This indicates that the Adi tribe trusted the cosmic forces and worshipped the natural lands in which they were born. 'Small histories recalled in the season of rain' described rain as 'rain mother sitting on the treetops, laughing in the mist'; the rainy season is particularly important for tribes in Arunachal Pradesh. It can rain for a straight sixty days in those areas, and people there are accustomed to rain. They regard rain as a sacred goddess figure and have ecological awareness of their surroundings.

The forest is treated as an active force capable of defending itself against external threats; in the story "Travel the road", an English officer records in his notebook his encounter with the forest: "the forest is like an animal.....the trees are enormous and sinister" (52). The Komsing village is surrounded by huge mountains, rivers and forests, and crossing them to reach the village is very difficult. They protect the village's people from outsiders and provide them with a livelihood. The Adi tribe is attached to their land and considers it sacred; their way of life depends on their land and natural habitat. Nemade described being native as being aware of the totality of geopeity (emotional bond between man and his territorial home) and cultural contact. He also claims every land has its own 'code of land,' and if that code is not felt in the intellectual activities of our literary creation, then such literature is of no use. (Nativism, 252)

Counter-histories and local time

"Small histories" are remembered across the seasons in the novel. The first encounter with white men, as priests or surveyors, was recorded as early as the 1800s. After that, many soldiers from all over the world have come and gone, but these historical events are remembered as stories shared by old men and women (38). They remember the first road carved out in the mountains through their experiences with different kinds of 'migluns'. "The migluns were fighting the Japans, and fires raged on earth and in the sky" (39). Their history of colonial expansion is not based on official records but on how they have encountered the 'bee-ree-tiss'. Indigenous records in the form of stories and songs are crucial to developing a deeper understanding of tribal people's perspective during colonisation.

Hoxo narrates how long ago there existed a green and virgin land ruled graciously by old chieftains, as they were akin to God. No one stole or killed any creature, and people were protected from danger in the chief's dwelling. In times of dispute, the chief would look up to the sky and the sacred fire, consult the spirits, and justice would be done. That's how it worked in the clan, and it was followed for generations, the footsteps of the ancestors. But when "the big trees were brought down, the spirits of our own ancestors who dwelt in these high and secret places fell with the trees" (42). Because of the destruction of the landscape, their tradition was also destroyed. Their history is deeply connected to forest lands, ancestral dwellings, and collective memory. The loss of forests caused parts of their community's history to fade.

The Rhapsodist is the historian of the Adi tribe. He collects the past in the form of storytelling. In the "songs of the Rhapsodist", the Shaman, Miri, or the Rhapsodist,

who is the oral historian, guardian of memory, and someone who can talk to spirits, narrates historical events through myths, stories, and memory, conveyed through the songs of the “ponung dancers” (50). Myths and legends in tribal groups are not just for entertainment; they are a source of indigenous knowledge.

Dai writes, “In this circles of hills, as in every corner of the world, all history is a history of connections” (61). Here, the history is not conventional but relational; it represents history through small events in the lives of tribal women, for instance, Nenam’s history. Or an event around the broken Danki of the Lotang family of the Migu clan that brought disaster to them. History is remembered through an event or a clan clash, a disaster, a marriage, or ancestral lands. So, there is no chronological time but a relational one, which is documented in stories and myths. In the section, “a matter of time”, Larkin shows his disregard for the government and said, “this one terrible road is all they have managed for us in fifty years! And what does it bring to us? Outsiders. Thieves. Disease” (156). State official records record these fifty years as progressive, but the lived experience of the indigenous community and their distress differ from the mainstream historical record. That is why this text is important for studying the perspective of tribal people of that time. Devy also emphasised Indigenous history through folklore, myths, and legends, rather than hierarchical mainstream history shaped by upper-class and elite politics.

Colonial encounter, Nativism and Indigenous knowledge system

The colonial encounter in the novel is not presented as a central theme, but rather as small incidents within the larger cultural life of the Adi tribe. For instance, the story of “River Woman” depicts the love story of Nenam and a British officer, David. They did not understand each other’s language, but they fell in love, and Nenam experienced a new world through him. When he left the village, she did not go with him but chose to stay in Duyang Village. “No one dies of love. I loved him, and now I am enough of my own” (109). Nenam is not depicted as a victim of colonisation, but as someone who chose to remain in her own culture and native lands. The colonial invasion disrupted the harmony and cultural order of tribal people, but it did not erase their indigenous cultural practices and customs. The Miris, shamans, and rhapsodists remembered the colonial invasions of their villages, forests and land through storytelling. The construction of roads became a great symbol of colonial invasion in tribal life, as it destroyed their trees and forests.

Though Dai documented the tribal experiences of her community in English, the Adi terms for local food, village, and clans remained unchanged, as they are unique to their language and cannot be translated into another language. For instance, ‘Migluns’ for foreigners, ‘miri’ for a ritual specialist, and ‘danki’ as a culturally significant vessel hold the highest value, as they help preserve the oral traditions of the Adi tribe. These local terms must be written as they are in every translation, as they carry the cultural heritage of the linguistic group in any society. The Adi tribe is not a homogeneous community but comprises distinct clans, families and villages. For instance, Migu is a clan; the Lotang family is part of the Migu clan; and Sirum and Duyang are villages of the Adi tribe. These are not merely names but constitute the diverse social categories of the Adi tribe. They retain systems of kinship, belonging and collective memory within the community. These local clans and villages, with their customs and rituals, establish the indigenous knowledge systems. These systems are the backbone of any tribal society, and they are distinct in every community. Balchandra Nemade argues that these native elements, which make up these knowledge systems,

appear in the literature of every community and help readers understand that community's culture and traditions.

Conclusion

This paper examined *The Legends of Pensam* from the nativist perspectives of Balchandra Nemade and GN Devy. The paper argues that the Adi tribe has its own history, which is not chronological. It situates the novel within its cultural context across different clans and villages to examine the Adi tribe's counter-perspective through stories, legends and myths. It also focuses on Dai's depiction of the connection between tribal people and their lands, the cosmic world and spirits.

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