

**MYTH, MEMORY AND MAMANG:
WRITING ORALITY AND VOICING THE MARGINAL**

Papiya Ghosh

Research Scholar

Department of English, Tripura University
Suryamaninagar-799022

Abstract

Mythos is much more than just another ‘story’. Myth has remained as an archetype in almost all forms of literature since centuries and its continuous creation across traditions perceives an inextricable relationship between myth and literature in the present and even envisions the same for centuries later. Transmission of folklore, myth and history were done orally. Literatures in northeast region of India are still experiencing the interface between orality and literacy. The unrecorded oral literatures of the people of northeast India got a new furnished look with the introduction of English, an alien tongue to write in. Whatever language the writers of this region adopt as their medium of expression, ‘writing orality’ is one of the main characteristics of their literatures. Mamang Dai is one of the foremost authors in this genre. The myths of the Adi tribes of Arunachal Pradesh contributed and determined the dimension of the writings of Mamang Dai. The lives of her characters seem to be assisted by various spirit, supernatural forces, beliefs, dreams and myths. Hence, in *The Black Hill* and *The Legend of Pensam*, we see an articulation of the various myths in a literate form. This paper aims to grapple her literary use of oral tradition to which she has attributed the central importance and its transformation into a literate tradition through her works.

Key Words: Myth, Oral tradition, Adis, written words, culture, literature.

Colonization is an institution that has always been projecting the culture and tradition of the natives as inferior and uncivilized. This continuous projection often encourages the natives to accept the western culture and values as superior to their own. Under this Civilization Mission of the intruders or the colonizers the age old traditions and customs of the natives or the indigenous communities of the respective place get perished and hence marginalized. The case of NEFA, presently known as Arunachal Pradesh of India, is somehow similar to the above mentioned concept of colonization which also brought marginalization along with it. In NEFA, the Missionaries under the veil of translation and transformation of the Adi language and oral tradition in a written form perhaps entertained a desire that is to some extent similar to that of the colonizers.

The North East Frontier Agency (NEFA), presently known as Arunachal Pradesh which is the focus area of this study, in the broader perspective, is one of the eight states of Northeast

region of India. It attained the status of a Union Territory on 20th January, 1972 and was renamed as Arunachal Pradesh which later acquired statehood in 1987. It has a rich historical and cultural background which speaks of the creation of all natural entities and human beings. This state is inhabited by 26 major tribes such as the Monpas, Mijis, Akas, Sherdukpens, Sulungs, Bagnis, Nishis, Apatanis, Hill Miris, Tagins, Adis, Membas, Khambas, Mishings, Idus, Mijus, Taraons, Khantis, Singphos, Lisus, Tangsas, Nocktes, Wanchus, Shyams and more than 110 sub-tribes. Interestingly, each tribal group has their own distinct culture, dialects, traditions and customs which find expression in their faith, belief, songs, dance as well as dress.

Each community, inhabiting in Arunachal Pradesh, has its own distinct culture, language, traditions and customs. Like others, the Adi tribe also inherited a rich oral literature from their forefathers. These oral traditions often intersect with myth, legends, cosmogony, etc in the conventional terms. Barring Manipuris and Assamese, no recorded history can be found regarding other tribes in this region. During the colonial period there were few documents written by British officials who acted as amateur anthropologists. However, those documents were maintained for their administrative convenience. Hence, tracing the roots of a tribe may heavily depend on oral traditions, material culture and British records for maximum of the communities inhabiting in this region.

Literature was always present in the history of every indigenous tribe; just that they were not written but transferred from generation to generation as part of the tribe's folk culture. Oral tradition consists of information, memories and knowledge held in common by a group of people over many generations. In a general sense, "oral tradition" refers to the collective memory transferred through word of mouth which constructs a common identity and shows group association. People are accustomed to remember their histories and their ways of life through storytelling. These ways of storytelling have recently been designated as oral tradition.

If we look at the marginalization that happened in case of the Adis of Arunachal Pradesh, we will see that there are layers of institutions that pushed them directly or indirectly towards the periphery. With the introduction of missionary schools in the Northeast region alphabets and literate tradition intruded the oral world of the indigenous tribes. Literacy reduced the use of native language and transformed it to a written form as well. This transformation was probably to the missionaries as civilization was to the Colonizers. In the words of Mona Zote "The missionaries came with a sympathetic approach towards indigenous culture ...The primary goal was to secure souls, not to preserve the continuity of ethnic customs and traditions" (Sen 210)¹.

The effect of Orality-Literacy shift in isolating and enclosing the mind of the present generation became evident in the lack of interest of today's generation to sit in a group to listen to stories. With the repeated projection of oral as inferior to the literate tradition by the new masters, the insiders or the indigenous tribes started paying more emphasis on literate tradition and in the acquisition of newly introduced alphabets. They considered the absence of alphabets as a lack in them which they wanted to fill. Hence, they accepted English and started to use it to transform their oral literature into a written one. It does not mean that many communities do not

have the knowledge of alphabets for we have heard stories of scripts being destroyed either by animals or floods.

If we take the help of the oral literature of the Tani groups of Arunachal Pradesh to trace the history of speech and alphabets we will see that previously they didn't have a script which could have resulted in the convergence of the Oral and literate tradition and preserved the oral tradition. Due to the absence of the scripts the tradition, culture, history, custom and identity of the tribes came on the verge of extinct and then they continued to preserve those only in an oral form. While describing the reason behind the absence of scripts myths say that the Adis had scripts written on animal skin which was destroyed by Loba, one of the ancestors of the Adis. "The tradition says the wise Man (believed to be the God Himself) distributed scripts to the three grandsons of Tani namely Memba, khamba and Loba. While the scripts for Memba and Khamba were written down on the bark of tree and slate of stone, on the other hand, scripts meant for Loba was written down on animal skin. One day Loba was very hungry, burnt the skin and ate it"(Osik 8)ⁱⁱ.

Other than the reason provided by myths behind the absence of scripts and the marginalization of the oral literature and traditions of the Adis, if we look at the emergence of scripts inside the oral world of the Adis we get to know that Shri Okep Tayeng of Ngopok village is the founder of Adi script. At time, the adaptation of a suitable script for the *Tani Agom* also became a serious concern for the NEFA Administration. The Northeast Frontier Agency, presently known as Arunachal Pradesh, came under British colonial rule along with the entire Assam after the Yandavoo treaty in 1826. After that an administrative body was established at Sadiya and along with the administrative development, educational development was also taken care of by the Christian Missionaries. With the establishment of a primary school at Sadiya the Missionaries adopted Roman script to translate some religious hymns in Adi or Tagin dialect. They even translated some school books in Adi dialect with the help of Roman Scripts. But after 1945 the translation of the Missionaries and the use of Roman scripts came to an end. Then in 1955 the NEFA administration took the initiative to produce books for primary education in Adi (Tani) dialect. With the initiative of the Text Book Production Branch(TBPB) Oshong Ering started to translate books in Roman scripts but they could not publish those books because of the rejection of Roman scripts by the then prime minister of India, Jawaharlal Nehru. Though they were again translated in "Dev Nagri Nayee Talim" script according to the order of the Prime Minister, students could not adopt this script properly and found difficulty in the course of their progress. According to Oshong Ering, till today the TBPB didn't publish any book and did not adopt any other script. In this way gradually literacy crept inside the oral world of the Adis.

These above mentioned issues have compelled the Adis to maintain their large volume of literature only in the oral form. But, the age old traditions and practices are now on the verge of extinction either because of the death of the old storytellers or the lack of practice and interest of the young generations due to the introduction of the literacy, writing and print culture. Introduction of alphabets, print culture and the acceptance of the missionary education pitted the oral tradition and the voices of the Adi culture too. The death of the old rhapsodists and the lack of knowledge of the other members of the individual tribes turned the tradition of storytelling

and its practice to be peripheral and a rare spectacle now. On the other hand, electronic culture mobilized the groups of listeners around other alluring devices such as TV, Cell phones, video games and print culture rather than around a rhapsodist or a narrator.

To make the muted and marginalized voices of the indigenous communities such as the Adis and their own indigenous culture those were previously preserved in an oral form and which are on the verge of extinction now, the writers of Northeast India have started to give their literature a new furnished look by using English language which is not a tongue of their own, with a flavor of oral tradition, proverbs, myths and legend of the respective community of this region. Customs such as headhunting, descriptions of nature, rituals performed in festivals or treatment of sickness, and names of clans or villages which explain the origin and stories of individuals and events associated with them are some mostly used topics of Northeast literature. Temsula Ao notes that Northeast writers look back to their cultural roots to reassess the marginalization of “orality” against the “written” and to find “a new literature of their own” by reinventing the oral traditions in the light of the present realities (106)ⁱⁱⁱ. Oral traditions, far from being a handicap, empower them by offering new avenues of creativity and new language of expression.

To discuss further about the marginalization of oral culture of the Adis of Arunachal Pradesh I have chosen the writings of Mamang Dai who is herself a member of the Adi tribe. Mamang Dai is a poet as well as a novelist. She is from Itanagar, the capital of Arunachal Pradesh. She is a writer writing in English from North-East India. She is one of the most intense poetic voices from the North-East region. She has featured in several national and international forums to promote the disappearing traditions of her state in the face of modernity and give voice to its people through the imaginative space of prose and poetry.

In the writings of Mamang Dai we get a different dimension about the lifestyle of the Adis in a written form that we do not find in the existing official documents or other recorded histories. The dimension of myth, history and culture that we get in Mamang Dai’s works is from the perspective of the insiders and which is free from the sceptical attitude of the outsiders. By incorporating the oral tradition in her writing she has shown her response to the impact of modernization on the oral history, hence the identity of the Adi community and the need to preserve it. In a way Mamang Dai becomes an auto-ethnographer who integrates her culture in her writings.

The root of orality lied in the panel of memory that Mamang Dai’s poem *The Missing Link* communicates:

*“Where else could we be born
where else could we belong
if not of memory.”*

Memory in oral culture plays the role of a bypass through which we can visit the realm of past, and memory is a link between past and present as well. Reference to the past is considered to be the way through which a society ensures cultural continuity with the help of

cultural mnemonics. Through selective remembering and forgetting as well as out of the fragmented human experience people construct stories in which past events collectively determine present existence and provide signals to guide future action. Oral literature found space in the fictional narratives of Mamang Dai that shaped or assisted the past, present and future of the characters of her novels, *The Black Hill* and *The Legends of Pensam*

Mamang Dai used many myths which are a part of the oral tradition of the Adis, in the stories of *The Black Hill* and *The Legend of Pensam*. In *The Black Hill* we see on several occasions the different characters of her stories to be considering themselves as the followers of Donyi-Polo^{iv} and their life to be invigilated by Donyi-Polo as well. During the end of the novel Gimur found her life to be unaccomplished and destroyed which she considered to be the punishment for breaking taboos. At that point Mamang Dai incorporated the creation myth of the Adis with the story of Gimur's life.

Adis are the followers of a religion which is based on the natural forces. They are the follower of Donyi-Polo. They even visualize their life on earth to be invigilated by various good and evil spirits, above whom they consider Sun (Donyi) and Moon (Polo) to be supreme. Donyi-Polo exists as a unifying and supreme entity in all Adi theology. According to the myths prevalent among the Adis Donyi-Polo descended from Kayum (The Mother Earth). Some others believe that at first there were two Suns with unbearable brightness. The frog shot at one of them and reduced the radiance and turned it to the cool and gentle Moon. But now, Donyi-Polo is designated as the supreme deity to the Adis. Such myths have served as exemplary patterns of the story of *The Black Hill*.

In *The Black Hill* Gimur says that they all are “created, all the offspring of Donyi Polo, from the bat and the worm struggling to mate and breed, to man and woman, for this one purpose” (Dai 122)^v. This statement of Gimur speaks about the creation myth of the Adi tribe. On the other hand, in *The Legend of Pensam* the story titled *travel the road* at the end harped on the belief about Donyi-polo again. According to a shaman in this story, the Adi tribes came in existence from nothingness and born under the stars and Donyi-polo which equally shines on every one as well as guide them.

Besides gods, the Adis also believe on the existence of good and bad or jealous spirits. In *the heart of the insect* included in *The Legend of Pensam* we find few instances of different types of spirits. There we get to know about a spirit named Dimi-tayang, “the lonely spirit who stirs up the lake waters and clutches trespassing men in an embrace of ice” (Dai 59)^{vi}. There are other instances of jealous spirits those encircle the travelers and every time the last man of the group of travelers used to sweep away the footprints to stop the spirits to follow them and to stop them from coming into the human world.

In *The Legend of Pensam* the story titled ‘pinyar, the widow’ speaks about the myth related to the origin of rice beer. While describing the reason behind the death of hunters or hunting accidents she recollected the myth related to rice beer. According to Pinyar, “once upon a time, there lived a race of supernatural being called the miti-mili. These small, quite people were the first to make the mysterious si-ye^{vii} that is the yeast used to ferment rice into beer” (Dai 28). They believe that the miti-mili race gave this method to mankind before disappearing from their land. Since then people believed that rice beer had special power which must be handled with respect and it became a part of every auspicious ritual of the Adis. It was even forbidden before hunting or a journey as it causes hallucination. This is the reason of Pinyar's not

considering the man who made Pinyar a widow to be responsible for the death of her husband. They believe that there is an evil spirit lurking in the Si-ye which makes man crazy or lose his conscience. Hence, they sprinkle si-ye on the eyelids of dead people those died of unnatural causes as they believe that by sprinkling Si-ye they can prevent the spirits of the dead persons from returning to the world for some unfulfilled search or desire.

To quote from the author's note of *The Legends of Pensam*, "The Adis practice an animistic faith that is woven around forest ecology and co-existence with the natural world." The myth and stories related to snake, birds, rivers, animals and many other creatures have been influencing and assisting the life of the people of the Adi tribe. In the story *The boy who fell from the sky* that we come across in *The Legends of Pensam* we witness how the myth related to serpent influence the life and death of a person. The story is about Hoxo and the mysterious death of his father. The people of Hoxo's village believed that there was a water serpent named Biribik. Though "no one, for generations now, remembered the name of the first person who had seen it, but the event was fixed in their collective memory" (Dai 9). They believed that once a fisher man saw a serpent up in the branches looking down at him with ancient eyes during a heavy rainy night. The serpent had horns on its head which appeared shocking to that fisherman. Then the fisherman ran for his life towards his village but "as everyone could have predicted he never recovered from the effects of that terrible vision. Within a year, he had died of a wasting illness."

One day Hoxo's father has also seen something like this as he told, "I heard a splash and when I turned I saw the edge of the river lifted up and the waters falling off the back of this long shining fish...or snake...But I saw it."(9) He even on the query of other told that he saw a head with horns. After listening to the explanations of Hoxo's father everyone of the village understood that he has seen the serpent Biribik and something "unnatural is bound to happen again." Hence, no one was surprised when Hoxo's father was killed in a hunting accident shortly afterward. Though he was killed by his fellow hunter mistakably still the hunter didn't get death as the punishment for killing a man. He got relaxation in punishment and had to live like animals in the forest for one month. The relaxation that the murderer got probably because of the pre-assured and pre-expected death of Hoxo's father due to the vision of Biribik or the serpent with horny head.

The myth of twins that we witness in *The Black Hill* has changed and rearranged the life of Gimur and Kajinsha immediately after Gimur gave birth to twin babies. She sensed it "from the silent faces watching over her... that nothing would be the same again" (Dai 85). The birth of the twins is considered to be unlucky according to Adi myths and as a consequence of it friends and neighbors avoid the mother and no one weaves cloth with her for fear of giving birth to twins. Even among some tribes across the world twins were killed at birth such as the Igbo tribe of Nigeria about whom we read in Chinua Achebe's *Things Fall Apart*. In *The Black Hill* of Dai we also get to see that the birth of the twins and death of one son at birth carried silence between Gimur and Kajinsha. Since then a strange fear started to haunt Gimur and she considered this to be a curse which "had befallen upon her."

Many myths and legends of Adis speak about the origin of gods and spirits, the origin of priests or shamans to mediate between the spirit world and the world of human. Along

with the origin of spirits and gods there we find the origin of sacrifices to reduce the anger of the gods as well as to satiate the thirst of the evil spirits. They believe on the power of the unseen bad and good spirits to harm and help human beings. In *The Black Hill* we witness the ritual *Ipak*^{viii} for the sick young man of the village named Mebo. The young man was suffering from an incurable disease. A shaman named Mutsang whom Lendem described to be very powerful sacrificed a chicken with his sword to loosen the grip of the spirit of a dead warrior. The Miri or the Shaman later “held the slaughtered bird over the sick man” and laid the blue beads those were around his neck on the sick man’s head. Such rituals and beliefs found a representation and became static in the form of written literature through the writings of Mamang Dai.

Dai has used several myths of the Adis to give a shape to her writings. Myth and literature is not different as it is often supposed. Myth, the body of inherited stories in any community is an important element of literature of that respective community and that literature serves as a means of extending those inherited stories to future generations to understand their collective identity. Hence, the mythos of the Adis became the logos for Mamang Dai. The ceremonies and stories documented in *The Black Hill* and *The Legend of Pensam* are either a part of the past or the body of folk imagination. Mamang Dai through her writings served the role of her community’s star or the role of the informer and presented the myths of the Adi tribe in a refined and printed form to her readers or the present generations. We can consider it to be an initiation of portraying marginalized folk imaginations such as ceremonies, rituals and belief those are undergoing a constant threat of extermination. In this way the oral literature of the Adis that was silenced by the introduction of print culture and modernization found a central space in the fictional works of Mamang Dai.

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ⁱⁱⁱ Sen, Soumen and Desmond L. Kharmwaphlang, editors. *Orality and Beyond*. Sahitya Akademi, 2007, pp. 106.

^{iv} The supreme God of the Adis. We can roughly translate Donyi as Sun and Polo as Moon. We get a variation in the spelling of the term Donyi-Polo. Here I have followed the spelling that Mamang Dai has used in her books.

^v Dai, Mamang. *The Black Hill*. Alpha Book Company, 2014, pp. 122.

^{vi} Dai, Mamang. *The Legend of Pensam*. Penguin Books India, 2006, pp. 59.

^{vii} An Adi term used for the rice bear.

^{viii} A ritual performed to cure the unknown disease.

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Bio-note:

- Name: Papiya Ghosh.
- Institutional Affiliation: Research Scholar of the department of English, Tripura University.
- P.O.: Agartala, west Tripura, 799001
- Email Id: papiya916@gmail.com
- Career History: I have joined Women's college of Agartala, west Tripura, after completing H.S. in 2012. I have completed my graduation with English honors in 2015. Then I got admission in Tripura University for pursuing M.A in English. I have completed my M.A in 2017. After passing out I have worked as Guest Lecturer in two Govt. Colleges of Tripura, namely Women's College and Udaipur College. I got admission for the Ph.D course in the Dept. of English of Tripura University under the supervision of Dr. Ksh. Premchandra Singh in 2017. I have participated and presented in few National and International seminars organized by different colleges and universities across Northeast region of India.