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Bioregional Narrativity: A Study of Mamang Dai's *The Legends of Pensam*

Vandana

Abstract

Bioregionalism can be defined as a defiant de-centralism and a mode to reclaim subalternised anticolonial epistemologies. In literary studies, biore gionalism approximates postcolonial recon ceptua lization of place and identity. Franz Fanon, in *The Wretched of the Earth*, identifies land as the primary site of postcolonial recuperation, sustainability and dignity. Edward Said, in *Culture and Imperialism*, argues that imagination is vital to recover land from the clutches of imperialism. Imagination happens to be the most significant means to recover place and identity from the neo-colonial homogenising forces of centralisation and globalisation. For Said, postcolonial writing is a process of recovery, identification and historical myth-making 'enabled by the land'. Such an ecological framing of postcolonial writing foregrounds the primacy of literature in reimagining the sense of place and spatial and cultural sovereignty. The present paper seeks to study how the novel, *The Legends of Pensam* by Mamang Dai, represents the ethos and concerns of bioregionalism and registers a powerful resistance to the stratification and appropriation of the heterogenous alterities. This study explores how the novel represents a "counter-tradition" and dislocates and redefines the boundaries of fiction writing with its place-based aesthetics forcing, in the process, a de-colonial epistemic shift in fictional narrativity based on pluri-versal, alternative aesthetic-structural paradigm.

Keywords: Bioregion, De-colonisation, Place-based Myths, Cultural Tradition, Pluri-versal aesthetics

Introduction

Bioregionalism can be defined as a defiant de-centralism and a mode to reclaim subalternised anticolonial epistemologies. Robert L. Thayer defines bioregion as "literally and etymologically a 'life-place', a unique region definable by natural (rather than political) boundaries with a geographic, climatic, hydrological, and ecological character capable of supporting unique human communities."(3) Thayer uses the term, 'bioregion,' to refer to the geographical and the cognitive context of the place which can be defined by "the unique human cultures that grow from the natural limits and potentials of the region. Most importantly, the bioregion is emerging as the most logical locus and scale for a sustainable, regenerative community to take root and to *take place*."(Thayer, 2003)[1] Doug Aberley expands the domain of the bioregional thought and study to socio-political space, 'Bioregionalism also implies a political and cultural practice that has evolved in response to the challenge of reconnecting socially-just human cultures in a sustainable manner in which they are irrevocably embedded.'[2]

Franz Fanon, in *The Wretched of the Earth*, identifies land as the primary site of postcolonial recuperation, sustainability and dignity. Edward Said, in *Culture and Imperialism*, argues that imagination is vital to recover land from the clutches of imperialism:

> If there is anything that radically distinguishes the imagination of anti-imperialism, it is the primacy of the geographical in it. Imperialism, after all, is an act of geographical violence through which every space in the world is explored, charted and finally brought under control. For the native, the history of colonial servitude is inaugurated by the loss of locality to the outsider; its geographical identity must thereafter be searched for and somehow restored…Because of the presence of the colonising outsider, the land is recoverable at first only through imagination (Said 77).

Imagination happens to be the most significant means to recover place and identity from the neo-colonial homogenising forces of centralisation and globalisation. For Said, postcolonial writing is a process of recovery, identification and historical myth-making 'enabled by the land'. Such an ecological framing of postcolonial writing foregrounds the primacy of literature in reimagining the sense of place and spatial and cultural sovereignty.

In literary studies, bioregionalism approximates postcolonial reconceptualization of place and identity. By foregrounding natural factors as a way to envision place, bioregionalism proposes that human identity may be constituted by our residence in a larger community of natural beings- our local bioregion- rather than, or at least supplementary to, national, state, ethnic, or other more common bases of identity. Literature is very much a part of this shift in perspective helping people reimagine the places where they live and their relations to those places, as well as reflecting the unique bioregional character of specific communities. Bioregionalism focusses on direct experience in a place and emphasizes the other modes of human experience which Gary Snyder has called "hearsay," the inheritance of knowledge we draw from our spiritual traditions, myth, philosophy.[3]

The present paper seeks to study how the novel *The Legends of Pensam* by Mamang Dai explores the evolution of a sustainable culture in the bioregion of Siang valley of Arunachal Pradesh as it traces the tales of community storytellers of the Adi tribe to create an affective bond between the residents of this region and the place in which they dwell. Mamang Dai, in the "author's note," establishes the regional and cultural coordinates of the place where the narrative takes place:

> Arunachal Pradesh …is the homeland of twenty-six tribes with over one hundred and ten sub-clans, each with a different language or dialect…The mightiest of its rivers is the Siang…and the Siang valley…is the

> territory of the Adi tribe who are the subject of this book…the Adis practice an animistic faith that is woven around forest ecology and co-existence with the natural world. (xi)

It reflects the deep connection that the natives have with these lands and underscores their attempt to preserve their cultural and ecological integrity in the face of increasing social, political and environmental pressures. It is the region whose inhabitants derive their identity from their relationship to the mountains and the valleys they live in. The novel represents a 'counter-tradition' to conventional writing about the indigenous communities and its place-based aesthetics call for a de-colonial epistemic shift in fictional narrativity based on pluri-versal, heterogenous aesthetic-structural paradigm.

Decolonisation, as understood in current critical debates, does not limit itself exclusively to the narrative of freedom from colonial powers, rather it also takes within its ambit the human right of self-determination too. The paper makes an attempt to investigate the narrative strategies through which Mamang Dai asserts and inscribes the right of the Adi tribe to self-representation and self-determination. Bioregionalism and postcolonialism share a common ground. Both aim to recuperate indigenous knowledge and language. Both entail a critique of the dominant discourse of the nation, imperialism and globalization, and, in doing so, both undertake a political stance. The paper explores the alternative postcolonial bioregional aesthetic praxis of the novel.

In the novel, the life of the people of Adi tribe is traced through a detailed exploration into their bioregion as well as their consciousness. Before beginning to narrativize the world of the Adis, Mamang Dai explicates upon the meaning of the word 'pensam':

> In the language of the Adis, the word 'pensam' means 'in-between'. It suggests the middle, or middle ground, but it may also be interpreted as the hidden spaces of

> the 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. (Mamang Dai, 2006)

'Pensam,' here, is the motif of the middle ground between the phenomenal and the spiritual, between reason and faith, between myth and reality. It is a trope representing a region with unique human culture where the boundaries between the world of6 humans and that of the supernatural frequently get blurred, where the man and the spirits intermingle to form an organic communion, where the human society and natural world complement each other to form a natural whole, where 'everything is interconnected'.

The narrative begins with the recounting of the legend of Hoxo, the boy who fell from the sky. Hoxo is a mythical figure with a mysterious origin who 'seemed to live in a timeless zone'. The mythical constantly keeps redefining the real, and becomes a vital meaning-making medium for the tribe and its people. In the novel, the mythical and the supernatural is juxtaposed with the lived reality to bring forth the alternative perception of reality of the indigenous community:

> What was the meaning of this kind of thing? They understood that it was a nebulous zone that divided the world of spirits and men – in fact, at one time men and spirits had been brothers. They knew that what was real could well be an illusion, and that reality might only be the context that people gave to a moment. (31)

By recuperating the local myths and collective beliefs, the legends and lores of the indigenous communities, the text evinces resistance to the stratification and appropriation of the heterogenous alterities. Underlining the ontological primacy of the cultural tradition of the native groups, Mamang Dai avers:

> …myths and legends are the basis of traditions and beliefs of communities across the world…We are here today as members of a community with a particular set of beliefs, by an act of faith, because we believed in the 'word' as composed in our myths and legends. It is here that we may find that peculiar, indefinable something by which we recognise each other, and make others see us as a group, a society, a people of a particular community. (Mamang Dai, 2009)

Myth-making and constant references to supernatural and to the world of spirits may seem to be unreal, bizarre and fantastic to the mainstream rationality, but the novel presents these to be the bedrock of the very real world of the Adis. These underscore an animistic worldview in which the reality, instead of being an absolute truth, keeps transforming and evolving. This perception of reality springs from the topography of the place and its ecology. The Adis trace their origin in 'Keyum' which is 'nothingness'--neither darkness nor light, nor had it any colour, shape or movement. As contrasted to 'Brahman' which denotes the supreme cosmic power, the ontological ground of being, the source, goal and purpose of all knowledge in Hindu mythology[4], Keyum of Adis 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 a 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.'(Mamang Dai, 2006)

The text foregrounds alternative discourse of knowledge and cognition which is distinct from the dominant philosophical discourse. The novel presents a pastiche of verisimilitudinous empirical realist mode of describing the nature, region/place (a bioregional practice) and mythic-fantastic mode of exploring

the cognitive spaces of its inhabitants, the Adis. The juxtaposition of realism with the mythological and the supernatural entails a critique of the mainstream dominant discourses of truth, identity and history. This critique is evident as the novel frequently focusses on the mind, the dreams, and the perceptive difference of the indigenous Adis. The orature provides Mamang Dai an important means to recuperate the oral narratives, the lores and tales that these communities and these places produce. The local myths based in place resist the totalizing essentialist identities promoted by the modernist ideas of 'truth'. A man getting afflicted and meeting a terrible fate after having the vision of Biribik- the water serpent who had a head with horns and 'ancient eyes'; another going delusional, hallucinating and launching on a killing spree, hacking his own children and wife after having stood under a 'ghostly tree'; the spirit manifestations of benevolence and malevolence- all these may seem bizarre and irrational to the mainstream rationality but to the ancient, primordial tribal consciousness the apparent disorder and chaos of these irrational acts are imbued with sense and reason.

The text revitalizes the traditional ecological knowledge systems by locating the origin of the rites and rituals of the community in these systems. Such rituals form the collective memory and get woven into the stories, folktales and lores to shape up the belief system of the indigenous:

> Once upon a time, there lived a race of supernatural beings called the miti-mili. These small, quiet people were the first to make the 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. (28)

The novel focusses on the strong communitarian ethics and kinship bonds that characterise the indigenous and define their

shared tradition and faith. As the old headman of Komsing explains:

> Such are the histories recorded by our shamans and rhapsodists…And in time of need, when a person falls ill or a fire starts suddenly, or when there is a murder or a fatal accident, all the remembered links of kinship are called up and word is sent to clan members to come to the aid of their brethren. (65)

Mamang Dai presents her narrative with an ecological imagination woven around forest ecology and co-existence with the natural world. The text carefully and responsibly focusses attention on the ecological diversity of the region and the wide variety of flora and fauna unique to the place which are the defining feature of the region's identity. The knowledge about their natural system makes the inhabitants of this inhospitable terrain with a harsh climate, a self-sustaining community.

The specificity of the place is established through references to its topography and its local biospace. It is a place where the 'Cicadas screamed' and 'huge locusts thumped against the bamboo'(78) and where 'every winter, men from the surrounding villages perched on the highest ridge set out on a journey to the snow-mountains to harvest a precious root. This is the deadly aconitum that is collected for the preparation of poison arrows...[There are]many stories associated with the excursion, most of them narrated with disbelief by the travellers themselves who say they were lucky to return alive, back from the realm of silent waste and hallucinations.' (58) The inhabitants of this territory are firmly embedded in the ethos of their native place. The rituals and belief systems are an integral part of the narrative and help to localize the text by grounding it in the Adi worldview. The Lotang family of Migu clan organises an elaborate ritual to revive their fortunes which they believed to have declined due to the disappearance of the famed vessel Danki. For the ritual, they felled the tallest tree that symbolised strength and brought a hive of wild ants which symbolized fertility and the birth of many sons.

The tribal's perception of nature as a life sustaining, healing force is juxtaposed with the miglun's – the mainstream outsider's – perception of it as a threatening, menacing force which signifies terror and suffering. While the forest is benevolent for the tribal, it is sinister for the 'miglun'. The White officers visualise it in terms of violent, beastly imagery:

> The forest is like an animal. It breathes all around us and we never know when it will suddenly rise up like a green snake out of the decaying vegetation or descend on us like a mantle of bats reeking of blood and venom. The trees are enormous and sinister…injured three of our native men. Their feet have been slashed open and they are screaming that they will die because these fire-hardened bamboo panjees are sharpened like blades and the points are dipped in poison.(52)

The kind, benign presence of jungle transmogrifies into an inimical, antagonistic force for the invader in which 'the twisted ropes of creepers and giant trees entangled in insidious embrace' and which needed to be blown away and dismembered with dynamite to be vanquished and conquered.

The natives suffer pain and dislocation due to the onslaught of mainstream invaders. The text highlights the resistance of the indigenous to the outsiders' attempts to invade their territory. They believe in natural justice and intuitively know that the ones who laughed in the face of the poor villager, insulted him calling him a wild beast eaten up with disease, spat on his face, committed a grave offence and deserved to be punished by the law of natural local justice. The man of the land, the indigenous, belongs to the place and resists the intruder's attempts to conquer his village with lies, bags of gifts and guns. The text traces the history of political, cultural and ecological depredation of the region, first, by the colonial masters and later, by the post-independence inheritors of power. The novel describes the socio-political events taking place around the Siang valley in the social realist mode.

With the arrival of the migluns, the whole area becomes a free trade zone. Land and river convoys, traders and porters moved around in all the directions. The intrusion and invasion by the outsiders altered the character of the place. The culture and tradition of the native stood threatened as these get diluted and replaced by the alien culture. The sacred biospace risked desecration and since it was being taken over by the 'ayings', the natives 'ha[d] to creep back into the boulders and stones' (97). The land was under siege. Myriad forces which were nibbling away slowly but surely at its very foundations included – soldiers of the new rulers of the land, the postcolonial sahebs who replaced the white sahebs, armed bands that fought a proxy war to get their own lands to rule, plainsmen and their co-conspirators from the hills who infiltrated the region to bring down the old trees and flatten the hills(130). The village that had moved with its own quiet rhythm for centuries with its old certainties and beliefs, was getting altered with the arrival of the road which ran up the mountain like a 'broken ladder of crumbling earth stained with iron ore'(148).

The road, the electric poles, the vehicles enticed the villagers into a mirage of progress and led them into harbouring hopes for a less harsh way of life that promised to pierce their dim homes like a sharp ray of light. But the road along with its attendant narrative of development proved to be a bad news. 'Their houses were not safe anymore, everyone knew that…young boys were robbing the supermarkets in town and teenagers were extorting money and riding away on stolen motorcycles. In the plains, migrant workers prowled at night planning burglaries and murder. Now they were here. Houses were marked'(151).

The development project of the postcolonial intruders brought urban ills to the sacred space. Larik, the son of Togla of Duyang village, with his perceptive remarks, exposes the specious dreams the state government sells to the hapless villagers – 'He thinks if we wait and be patient the government will reward us. Reward us with what? This one terrible road is

all they have managed for us in fifty years! And what does it bring us? Outsiders. Thieves. Disease'(156).

The old days of war and valour had vanished. The guileless tribespeople of the hills had surrendered their ancestral lands to the state in the hope of progress but the road and the other appendages of the development schemes 'seem[ed] to be strangling them and threatening to steal their identity like a thief creeping into their villages and fields'(157). The tribal culture, tradition, belief system, and their very identity was fading fast under the onslaught of indiscriminate implementation of formulaic development projects. Without making any attempt to acquaint itself with the indigenous or trying to comprehend and ascertain their specific needs, the uniform, homogenised formula of progress imposed on the region by the state spells disaster for the region. The text presents a powerful critique of the appropriation and acculturation of the spatial and cultural heritage of the tribal by the ill-conceived development schemes of the state.

Mamang Dai does not present the place as a homogenous, unified, marginalised region but as a meaningful place which is culturally rich and alive and continually under threat of getting ravaged by the dominant power groups. It is this alternative perception of reality that shapes the place-based aesthetics of the text. The text recuperates indigenous knowledge and practices and functions as an effective medium to coalesce the native human history with the ecological concerns. It highlights the self-sustaining eco-system of the Adis and resists reductive representation of the indigenous as primitive beings.

Conclusion

The *Legends of Pensam* represents the ethos and concerns of bioregionalism and enlarges the boundaries of fictional writing. Reflecting the concerns of bioregionalists, Dai is concerned about her native region. She retrieves the stories of the bioregion of her native place and of its past to redefine 'what it means to live responsibly and responsively in a particular place…cultivate(s) an awareness of environmental justice.'[5]

The novel problematises the homogenised, reductive representation of the north-east in the mainstream imaginary by focussing on the diverse, polysemic, multilateral geo-cultural region and representing it in all its nuanced specificities. The novel's unique, alternative unconventional bioregional aesthetics is shaped by the realist description of socio-ecological devastation and plundering of the region contrasted with the dreamlike mytho-poetic enunciation of the cognitive spaces of the Adis by which they make meaning and produce knowledge. The novel records the cultural production of the indigenous and thus asserts their right to self-representation. By foregrounding their folklores, myths, legends, rites, rituals, traditions and native beliefs, it reclaims their epistemic agency and asserts their claim to the production of knowledge.

The aesthetics of the novel is rooted in the oral cultural enunciations of the originary communities. The bioregional aesthetics of the text undermines the notion of tightly knit, linear structural design of a conventional novel through its meandering, non-linear narrative in which nineteen sub-tales reflect plurality and convergence. The non-linearity, indirectness and plurality of the form gets accentuated and resonated by the biology and topography of the place. The intricate web of nineteen tales, each of which is independent and unique yet shares the common core of folk, native consciousness, is marked by their simultaneity and flux. This multiplicity and confluence shapes the structure of the novel. The text attempts to evolve an epistemological framework premised on a multilateral understanding and appreciation of identity formation and assertion.

Endnotes

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