

*Telling Stories and Searching for an Ideal Listener:
North-eastern Women in
Modernity*

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North -East literature has developed as a category of writings clad in an intentional assertion of the roots, an attempt to be heard and an awareness of its own conflicts in the threshold of modernity. With writers taking recourse to vibrant storytelling tradition that characterises this land, North East writing has pitted itself against the propinquity that is posed by the electronic and digital medium. Storytelling requires a teller and a listener, and utilising the ‘oral tradition’, much of these writings have focused on a generation and community of people who

have lived and grown in close-knit communities. This paper will focus on Mamang Dai's *The Legends of Pensam* (2006), as a primary text to analyse how the stories and history of a tribe are represented in a lyrical tribute to her land. In her individual way, she shows women caught up in the tangles of love, honour and duty, asserting their own sexuality, searching and finding 'home' and in the process always searching for a 'listener'. The methodology used is a careful reading of the stories set in a unique ecology from the perspective of voices that require a listener to respond in special ways. 'Politics of voice' and 'erotics of talk' provide a frame to the perspective adopted in this paper. This is because these are women's stories, narrated to women as an immediate audience. Hence the 'listener' index is crucial both in unmasking the subjugation that women face psychologically as well as the assertion of liberty in the context of voicing their opinions. In both cases, women 'speak' and Mamang Dai appropriates this conflict in the journey that becomes *Pensam*. In the supposed egalitarian set up of tribal societies, the paper questions the very mode of equality in what women are 'allowed' to do as regards life choices. In a recourse to legends, myths and day to day experiences of women, *Pensam* and any analysis of it has to be mindful of the uniqueness of both the geography and location. In a guide to women's writing, Patrocínio P. Schweickart's recalling of Showalter's 'gynocritics' and the implications become important to this context: "development of the reading strategies conso-

nant with the concerns, experiences and formal devices that constitute these texts” (Schweickart 2004, 433). It needs no reiteration that the women are sited in a post-colonial setting mediated by modernity, and it is only important to remember that “imperialism and colonialism have had distinctive effects on women” (Harding 2008, 155). In conformity with the consequent changes, women narrate and listen to each other.

Storytelling is perhaps as old as human beings, yet thinkers like Walter Benjamin have devoted a sustained attention to the tradition of storytelling in various moments of history and its subsequent oblivion under the pressures of information. The writer under discussion, relies heavily on storytelling, on orality and in doing so, veers away from a kind of ‘revisionist imperative’ (Showalter n.p.) that Elaine Showalter warns against. While, echoing her words, the text is not radical or separatist, it however capitalises on women’s experiences of storytelling, mysticism, love and assertion of individualism. Bijoya Sawain’s very indicative title to her book *Khasi Myths, Legends and Folk Tales* is a ‘retelling’. These are popular tales passed on through generations and preserved in the collective memory of the people of a region (here, Meghalaya). The paper begins with a mention of Sawain’s work though it deals mainly with Mamang Dai’s *Pensam* because her work or ‘retelling’ is evocative of the popular tradition of the region. A trove of twenty one tales, these are divided into sections that deserve mention for

a few reasons. The division is mindful of the putative heads under which folk tales are circulated. A listing of the heads in this book will make things clear: Origin Tales; Explanatory Tales; Trickster Tales; Tales of Love and Tragedy; Moral Tales; Tales of Horror and the Supernatural; Tale of Human Adventure; Tales of Kings and Queens; Tales of Hills, Rivers and Waterfalls. As the names suggest, this collection contains characters ranging from animals to human beings to trees to waterfalls. The veracity of these tales can be easily questioned or its legitimacy as potent sources of history. However, in the absence of any written records of pre-colonial times of the tribal areas of this region, folklore functions as the repertoire of both tradition and culture, and of man's indomitable spirit in surviving disasters. What orality 'chooses' to remember then is a strand of memory that gives a particular group a feeling of solidarity or belongingness. In the words of Paul Ricoeur :

We must not forget that everything starts not from the archives, but from testimony and that... we have nothing better than testimony, in the final analysis, to assure ourselves that something did happen in the past. (cited in Malsawmdawngliana, Gangte, and Rohmingmawii 2015, n.p).

In the absence of archives, or any tangible form of history, oral memory is the testimony to a people's past. In opposition to seeing it as tapered down to the subse-

quent generations, tales of love, kinship and even origin become the breathing spirit of a community's identity. It is in this note that Mamang Dai puts in paperback the fascinating tales from Arunachal Pradesh, specifically from a village of the Adi tribe. The author's note gives us a glimpse of the world we are about to enter: this is a narrative of and about people who practice animistic faith, with a sustained preoccupation with forest ecology and co-existence with nature. Mamang Dai, in the very first tale "The Boy who Fell from the Sky" gives, as if, an aerial view of the landscape in a character's ocular understanding of his surrounding: "...he saw green. A green wall of trees and bamboo, and a green waterfall... the giant fern at seemed to be waving to him." (Dai 2006, 7) The insistence on green prepares the reader for an association of every event with nature. The writer brings an ecological understanding to the text, nature is beautiful, benevolent and redoubtable. Nature finds its way in the "collective memory" (Dai 2006, 9) of the community. The story of a water serpent Biribik invites both fear and admonition: any sight of it by anyone culminates in unnatural consequences, hunting accidents for example that would lead to death of someone and ostracism of the other.

Myths and legends have become the inevitable definitions of culture for the people of this region where the fear of the loss of identity looms large in the face of majoritarian assimilation. Since the politics of repre-

sensation plays a fair share in the assertion of identity, 'subaltern' identity in the case of the North East has remained true to the myths, legends and folklore of the land. There is a constant appropriation of these in an attempt both to preserve and assert the distinctive voices of a region which is caught in in-betweenness.

The stories provide an inventory of queries regarding the ideas of ethnic authenticity that are enmeshed in discussions of gender identities and the feeling of community as family. These have become important strands to comprehend the ideas of ethnicity, gender in ethnicity, the endangerment of ethnicity among many other things. This is then an understanding of tradition as "invariant repetition" (Gilroy 1993, x): how tradition is re-asserted, reworked and recontextualised so as to fit in the weighing demands of modernity. In a bid against the segregating politics, such preoccupations focus on the ever-developing nature of identities, however much rooted in tradition. Such mutability garners attention, for it undergirds much of the works under focus. Women, in traditional set ups, undergo a process of development in their character. Assertions of their voices, actively participating in storytelling process, secure the safeguard of narratives that the people, across generations, hold dear. There is a propensity to pass down stories, establishing brotherhood/ sisterhood and establishing an intimacy between people and the stories that have distinguished them for long. Such writers demystify oral tradition so

that readers understand the ways its conventions are exercised over time. A postcolonial world takes different forms in different historical contexts, and the one that Dai is dealing with affirms that “women live in different conditions, with different relations to patriarchal principles and practices, in different classes, races, ethnicities and cultures” (Harding 2008, 157).

For an outsider like Mona, the stories that she is acquainted with through the people, of their past, myths and their beloved people, are full of awe. On asking for any tangible proofs of family or lineage, such as photographs, the woman replies: “‘There is nothing like that.’... ‘There are only stories that I hear all the time, and most of the time I think my husband just makes them up.’”(Dai 2006, 89)

In these lines are encoded the middle way between belief and disbelief that *Pensam* treads on. When Walter Benjamin warns against “the decline of storytelling”, (Benjamin 2006, n.p) *Pensam* provides the answer through a collection of myths, legends and simpler narratives that have kept the spirit of storytelling alive. In being listened to, sometimes by outsiders and sometimes by the various generations of the village, *Pensam*’s breathing spirit is memory: “Memory is the epic faculty par excellence.” (Benjamin 2006, 368) In the belief-disbelief dichotomy, the reader is never forced on with the credibility of the narratives. Mamang Dai, artistically, leaves the ends

open, insisting more on the potency of the stories to define a community rather than assuring and forcing the veracity. This, Benjamin again remarks, is a mark of the penchant for storytelling:

The most extraordinary things, the marvellous things are related with the greatest accuracy, but the psychological connection of the events is not forced on the reader. It is left up to him to interpret things the way he understands them, and the narrative achieves an amplitude that information lacks. (Benjamin 2006, 366)

The writer herself, in the midst of narrating these tales, ponders on the authenticity, never dismissing but never again affirming any tale/ myth. For example, as regards the strange behaviour of a man and attributing it to him being possessed by spirits, the narrative voice speaks on behalf of the villagers:

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 be an illusion, and that reality might only be the context that people gave to a moment. But they were shaken. (Dai 2006, 31)

Reality/illusion, tradition/modernity, belief/disbelief, these are the binaries within which the narrative structure operates and *Pensam* is in its collective form

the in-betweenness of these. It thereby becomes, in Mamang Dai's artistic endeavour, a repository of the various practices that characterize the land, a belief system that has survived generations through orality and the perpetual conflict of independence and domesticity encoded in women's experiences.

Conversations and sometimes only listening to each other is rampant in the pages of *Pensam*. Richard Rorty says, conversation "is the ultimate context within which knowledge is to be understood" (1979, 389). Rorty's conversationalism attributes wisdom and philosophy to conversation, and keeping a conversation going. The dialogic exchange encourages "plurality of voices and social vocabularies that we now associate with multiculturalism." (Kaplan 1996, 8). However, Rorty's model fails to acknowledge the varied social footings that determine who says what, and how much. A social or cultural hierarchy more often than not only furthers alienation for those located at the periphery. Nancy Hartstock, in offering a feminist critique of the model, questions the apparently emancipatory power of conversations, it being "dangerous to those of us marginalized." (Kaplan 1996, 8) This contention comes up from a reservation regarding the equal footing of people involved in a conversation. Under such circumstances, there are dangers of one / a group's voice being silenced and the other's imposing. Rorty's model, thus analysed, can be legitimate only when the conversation is between equals. In *Pensam*,

Mamang Dai is on a nostalgic visit to the hills, accompanied by her friend who is a magazine editor, Mona, who is of Arab-Greek origin. In this rendering of a multicultural set up, there is every probability of the hills' voices being subdued under the gaze of the educated, modern eye. However, Pensam shuns any patronizing gaze of this kind from the very start. In fact the stories narrated here establish a sort of affinity between women from walks of life placed at very different poles. In "the Silence of Adela and Kepi", the author establishes parallels between motherhood and its unheard retaliation to unjust accusations of neglect. Mona is a mother to an autistic child Adela who subsequently died and Kepa is a child of the village on who 'tragedy' befell. In both cases, the mothers are blamed for what the men deem to be "neglect" towards their child. These stories bind the women in a common grief, one longing for motherhood again.

Five tales sectioned under "Daughters of the Village" set the tone for understanding how women live in a traditional Adi village. As in a series of snapshots, Mamang Dai gives a picture of community life and living. In "Words of Women", for instance, the scene is of women working hard in the forest, collecting stuff to be carried back to the village. While their hard work awes the reader, their longing for happiness and a latent wish to see and know the world beyond the village is very apparent: "Is this a place to live?" She had asked. "Why did

our forefathers choose this place? Surely we are outcasts dumped in this bone and knuckle part of the world!” (Dai 2006, 74)

Such exchanges are limited to groups of women, where women expect a kind of solidarity in their conditions of being immured in a village that seems to be cut off from the world outside, in their bereavement, in their eternal longing to be ‘happy’: “Of course we are unhappy. I am unhappy. Unhappy, unhappy, unhappy!” (Dai 2006,75)

These are women who are aware by now of the vast advancements that are happening in the world outside, and their latent desire to partake in it. “Live properly”, or “speak English” (Dai 2006, 75) for instance point at an already pervading colonial influence in the land. While the younger lot are lured both by education and the world outside, the older listeners to these outpourings come up with their warnings: “If a woman becomes too clever no one will marry her.” (Dai 2006, 76) In these exchanges, the caveats of what women should want, desire, or wish for are placed at opposite ends. This is a choice between limiting oneself to the natural ecology of the village, getting married and performing duties as a wife and mother as opposed to moving to a place where the landscape does not demand ardent physical exhaustion and the charm of colonial education. Anecdotes and exchanges of this kind nevertheless point to a condition where women have ‘listeners’, as opposed to

not having anyone to listen to them. This is what can be called “contestatory politics of voice” (Kaplan 1996, 4) which involve women, placed across various age groups, characterised by a multiplicity of opinions and choices. This “politics of voice” is very different from an ideal “erotics of talk” (Kaplan 1996, 15), where you seek not just for a listener, but a listener who can respond appropriately to it. This is evident in the story in the speaker’s desire to be heard. This erotics of talk is then a utopian situation where you imagine both parties, the speaker and the listener to share an understanding of what is being said, what is desired and what is wanted to be understood. The narrator here (Mamang Dai) involves herself in this ‘talk’, sharing and understanding the speaker’s mind because she comes from a similar position and has ‘lived’ the world, moved beyond her village and is a product of colonial education.

It would also be helpful to bring in Victor Turner’s concept of “liminal”. This can be explained as a space where the female tries to transcend exile or cope with it. In resisting thus, they try to reconnect with their bodies and communities. The agent of their resistance becomes the female bodies, via speech, silence, starvation or illness. The ‘politics of voice’ is linked to this, communicating about the compromises they need to make each day, capitalising on speech and exchanges to narrate their troubled and confined existence as well to express their desires. The friction between colonial advent and indigenous

set-ups is most explicitly evident in the story “River Woman”. In a tale of love between a woman of the land, Nenem and an officer named David, there is a deviation from the Oriental gaze to the exotic ‘other’. Nenem and David’s story is a testimony to a love that did not culminate in marriage. However, here lies the story of a woman who ‘dared’ to love, and their story is a playing out of Mary Louise Pratt’s “contact zone”(No parenthetical or bibliographic citation): cultures meeting, often in relations which are asymmetrical in nature. The initial interactions are not unmarked by fear: “Nenem knew in her heart that this strange man was calling her into an unknown zone that could only bring her disaster.” (Dai 2006, 97)

Their love without even knowing each other’s language captures the spirit of *Pensam*: the one the writer explains at the beginning. In addition to suggesting the middle ground, ‘pensam’ is also the small world where anything can happen. Here, love defies language and power relations (in respect of the colonizer and the colonized). It is in this relationship that the woman indulges in the “erotics of talk” previously explained. The two found their lost and missing pieces in each other:

Through him she saw the world beyond. She saw cities and streets full of people and heard the skies reverberating with the sound of airplanes that filled her with a longing for far-off places. (Dai 2006, 100)

In David, both the village and Nenem brought in a kind of peace and spiritual connect. The two, even at such diverse positions, communicated and understood with a show of love and empathy:

... it was he who was searching for the meaning of his life, and he sensed that through this woman he was beginning to unveil the secrets of the earth, the stillness of the sky, and even the depths of an unaccountable, ageless sorrow that he had always carried inside but from which, he now knew, there could be rebirth. (Dai 2006,100)

Even when they consummate their relationship, it liberates her: “Her body had changed. She was complete and she felt no fear. She felt alive, full of power, and full of the desire to give and to receive.” (Dai 2006, 4)

The body thus remains inextricably linked to a political praxis. As Ketu H. Katrak explains in *Politics of the Female Body*, a politics of the female body must include the construction and control of female sexuality, its acceptable and censored expressions, its location socio culturally, even materially. Sexuality becomes the arena where patriarchal control is exerted most distinctively over the female body, but in Nenem, it is a mode of liberation. Female protagonists undergo “internalized exile” where the body feels disconnected from itself, as if it does not belong to it and it has no agency. In the oral testimonies, the body speaks, and women find voice in narrating their

lives. The complicity and consent as internalized oppression may even be embodied as 'female responsibility' as in putting up with oppressive marriages, complying with dominant spouses, even making the body available for others' pleasure. While many women in the village have put up with such 'responsibility', Nenem remains the epitome of exercising her will, letting her body speak and liberate. When the choice comes to go away with David and choosing her own people, she 'chooses' the latter: "No one dies of love. I loved him, and now I am enough on my own." (Dai 2006, 109)

While there are tales of love in *Pensam*, the Nenem-David tale is outstanding in its contrasts that characterize the location of the lovers' selves as well as the seamlessness with which each finds his and her completion in the other. In a book that sets out (and successfully fulfils the attempt) to consolidate the Adi experience in writing, this paper has devoted a sustained attention to a retelling of women's experiences because it is in these handful of tales that the perpetual quest for a listener is very explicitly highlighted. The reader is a listener again, to a woman's attempt to capture women's experiences set in a time when tradition and modernity are not placed at loggerheads but side by side. The author's voice is distinctive, like in most women's writing, for "womanhood itself shaped women's creative expression" (Showalter 2004, 312).

The paper concludes with the proposition that Mamang Dai's *Pensam* is a treasure trove of tales from the hills. However it is in its implicit search for a listener that the urge of these tales to reach a wider audience can be inferred. A thorough reading of the text thus succeeds not only in understanding the community but also in establishing a sort of affinity as regards shared experiences of women, the universal charm of community living and most importantly, human beings' natural instinct of storytelling. While colonial influence changes the very make-up of the society, it also brings into question important aspects of women's education, relationships and marital demands. In the mid-path that *Pensam* traverses, there is the dilemma of women more than anything else in the perennial conflict of 'obligations' and 'will'.

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