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A Story of Belonging and Eco-cosmopolitanism: Mamang Dai's *The Legends of Pensam*

**Alice Kurian
Dr. K. M. Johnson**

*A cosmopolitan existence in harmony with nature, a cosmopolitan green existence, is the need of the hour. It is important to prevent the world from moving towards an apocalyptic future, where extinction of species including humans would not only be a possibility but a reality. This cosmopolitan green existence is expected to be an egalitarian ideal that can accommodate all species on the planet - human and non-human - without being involved in 'othering'. It should move beyond the binaries which remain rigid despite the deconstruction of the binaries in the contemporary post-structural world. The theory of eco-cosmopolitanism which advocates an egalitarian, cosmopolitan and ecological ideal of existence, also attempts to redefine the notion of belonging beyond the current anthropocentric definitions of man and nature. This paper explores how certain spaces which are marginalised and put on the threshold of liminality turn out to be real spaces of all-encompassing eco-cosmopolitanism. The paper through the analysis of Mamang Dai's portrayal of the Adis tribe of Arunachal Pradesh, in *The Legends of Pensam*, delineates how one can belong to an eco-cosmopolitan world.*

Keywords: Belonging, Bio-empathetic receptivity, Eco-cosmopolitanism, Threshold of Liminality

Man is a territorialized being. He is inclined to divide and demarcate the landmass of the planet into various individual units or territories. Nation-states emerge from such demarcations which are formulated on the basis of social, economic and cultural markers of race, gender, caste, tribe and the like. The human sense of belonging is thrust upon these demarcated nation-states. The individual is placed either on a position of privilege or on the fringe of exclusion on the basis of these markers of belonging. Despite the contemporary deconstructive processes of the binaries, the world still identifies an individual with 'one' or the 'other' in the binary system. So, in the contemporary barrier-free world of flux and fluidity, and cosmopolitanism and heterogeneity, it is important to redefine the human sense of belonging.

The revisit/redefinition of the sense of belonging demands a radicalization of the prevailing anthropocentric existence of man that has successfully constructed the parameters of geographical and mental cartography. The process, however, needs to be all-inclusive and non-discriminatory, where an all-encompassing cosmopolitan belonging would destabilize the binaries. The cosmopolitan belonging is perceived as a space where nothing is 'othered', a level playing field, where there is a fair chance of survival for all. This perception of the world as an all-accommodating space, a space that belongs to everything on the planet, both animate and inanimate - is called eco-cosmopolitanism.

The human-centred present has evolved from a past which was uncivilized as per the current norms and patterns of civility. Humans, though aware and educated about the past and the impending apocalyptic future, act ignorant of the same. In the prevalence of this ignorance, one is forced to contemplate on the possibility of a human-void world. There have been certain literary attempts that have imagined the 'post-human' existence. One such work is the science fiction drama *The Last War* by Neil Grant which analyses the anticipatory situation of a microbe-induced pandemic that has consumed the whole human population, leaving behind the animal world to rejoice in the extinction of the most dangerous species on the planet. This is just an extremely imaginative apocalyptic perspective. But a human-void world

can never be a solution rather it would be another trauma to the planet amongst many. As stated by Alan Weisman in his work *The World Without Us*, the world or rather nature is so accustomed to human intervention that

...if humanity were to stop its immense industrial activity abruptly and let nature take its balanced course, the result would be total breakdown, an unimaginable catastrophe ... “pollution” being already deeply implicated in the shaky and fragile equilibrium of “natural” reproduction on Earth- that its cessation would cause a cataclysmic imbalance (Zizek 80).

Therefore, the need of the hour is to ensure the availability of a space which is sufficient for everyone, so that everyone has their space, everyone is in their own space, and also, everyone knows and does what is to be done to keep everyone including themselves in those allowed and acknowledged spaces (81). This idea of developing a space where nothing is othered or isolated can be understood as eco-cosmopolitanism.

Eco-cosmopolitanism is an “environmental world citizenship” (Heise 10), which promotes increased connectedness across societies around the globe in order to set stage for the emergence of novel forms of culture that are de-territorialised, i.e., no longer labelled or anchored on the basis of place (10). This deterritorialization associated with eco-cosmopolitanism urges humans to re-imagine their belonging in harmony with nature.

Indeed, there are people who live in harmony with nature, looking into nature, looking up to nature and finding answers to their existential questions from nature. But they exist on the fringes, geographically and socially. From time immemorial, various individual societies and communities are marginalised on numerous grounds. With the passage of time even though the idea of the marginalised and the acceptance of a marginalised existence was questioned, the marginalised remained to exist in the liminal spaces allotted to them by the hegemony. Liminality, essentially refers to the existence on the threshold, on the fringes. Homi. K. Bhabha, in his *Location of Culture*, identified liminality or liminal spaces as third spaces which are

spaces of exclusion and inclusion at once, thus, adding on to the idea of threshold. These liminal spaces, in the post-colonial context, represents the position of the colonised as a native who idolises the coloniser, but seeks freedom from the latter only to identify himself /herself as a distanced mimesis of the coloniser. Thus, the position of the colonised becomes an ambivalent, hybrid space.

Thinking beyond the post-colonial context, the marginalised still remain on the fringes, on the threshold set by the political and the cultural hegemony. The concern of this paper is those who still exist on the fringes without being counted in the hybrid extension of the colonial legacy, the natives, the aborigines, the ones who exist on the fringes, socially and geographically at all times. The attempt is to visualise how the marginalised aborigines belong to the threshold and how this threshold becomes an all-accommodating space, despite being a space of exclusion and inclusion at once.

In the Indian context, the various tribal groups spread across the various biodiversity hotspots all over the country are identified as existing on the societal fringes. While the mainstream society hybridise the ways of the colonial civilization, the indigenous tribes preserve nature and the natural by means of their sacred groves and associated rituals. Though this idea of the aborigines applies to all the aboriginal tribes in India, this paper focuses on the Adis tribe of Arunachal Pradesh, represented in Mamang Dai's *The Legends of Pensam*.

Arunachal Pradesh is a critical space, being a tribal heritage and sharing boundaries with China, Bhutan and Myanmar. *The Legends of Pensam* revolves around the various tales popular among the Adis tribe, who inhabit the central part of Arunachal. As mentioned in the author's note to the work, they practice "an animalistic faith that is woven around forest ecology and co-existence with the natural world" (Dai xi). In the narrator's prologue, she addresses her native land as "the hidden valleys of my home" (3). These hidden valleys hide within them legends and rituals collected in the collective memory of the tribe.

The word "pensam" signifies the state of being in an "in-between" space in the language of the Adis tribe. This in-between

space could be interpreted as the middle ground created by culture, within culture, where one finds it difficult to acknowledge one's existence within and without the cultural bounds. This space, thus, signifies the threshold upon which the Adis tribe, like most other tribes exist. This threshold becomes the threshold of belonging, i.e., on one level the members of the Adis tribe identify themselves with their ancestors who lived a life in harmony with the nature and the forests. On another level, the same tribespeople, being not oblivious to the cultural progress within and beyond their community, finds it difficult to be accustomed and acknowledge the changes around them. Also, this threshold is the 'nowhere space' created in the collective unconscious, borrowing from Carl Jung, where all the tales and legends about the various dimensions of the community, the forests to which they belong, the villages they have created, the ancestors lost in legends, are collected.

Pensam is not a geographical space, but the name attributed to a surreal space created in the psyche of the Adis tribe and the ones associated with them, with reference to the existence they lead on the threshold of culture, belonging neither to the cultural post-colonial modernity nor to the pre-colonial ancestral heritage. On another level, Pensam is that space from where various legends and tales prevalent within the community, connecting births, deaths, illness, absconding and behaviour of people within the tribe originates.

The collective memory, in Jung's terms, defines the ideology of a society. The tribal community of Adis have devised for themselves a set of rules, rituals, experiences and knowledge that does not find acceptance in the mainstream scenario. The story of Hoxo, the boy who fell from the sky, could be considered as an example. Hoxo was not born to his parents but rather was brought home by his father, once upon a time, when the latter returned from work, thus, emotionally stabilising the childless couple. In the mainstream scenario, people would have triggered the obvious questions regarding the child's birth, biological belonging and the likewise. However, among the Adis tribe, they accepted Hoxo's and Rakut's fathers' perception that the boy fell from the sky and he was brought home. This acceptance of the unknown as one's own without othering makes Pensam, the collective

memory of the Adis tribe, an eco-cosmopolitan space, where there is no question of ‘non-belonging’.

The peculiarity of the Adis tribe was that they lived in harmony with nature, worshipped nature and believed in nature, thus, developing a spirituality in union with nature. They looked upon nature and their endeavours with nature in order to find answers to all the questions that was part of their day-to-day lives. When Kepi, son of Togum fell ill all of a sudden, the family invited Hoxo to perform a serpent ritual so as to redeem the family off the sin of accidentally killing a python during one of Togum’s hunting expedition to the forest. Togum and his family bestowed the plight that befell their family on the death of the python. Nobody questioned Hoxo performing the ritual of the Adis tribe even though Hoxo’s biological belonging was unknown. This acceptance of Hoxo to the community as their own makes the legends of Pensam an all-encompassing space.

Again, the collective unconscious of the tribe is filled with stories or rather legends that could answer even the existential questions. Their legends and living are beyond the scope of morals, punishments or judgements by any means suggested by the dimensions of the mainstream cultural dialectics. For instance, when Hoxo’s father was killed in the hunting accident the man who committed the crime was punished in a strange way. The culprit “was banished to live like an animal in the forest for a whole month. His closest kin could take him cooked food but there were so many taboos on the type of food he could eat that it was simpler to let him fend for himself” (11). Similarly, when Kamur, the government-serving son of widowed Pinyar, murdered his own child in a moment’s frenzy, though he was arrested by the local police, his mother came to his rescue and no one including the members of his family demanded legal punishment. Though the townsfolk showered anger on him none of the tribesmen to whom he belongs questioned his action, but rather the community accepted it as a spiritual intervention, being a community who believed in the connection between spirits and human, i.e., the spiritual intervention in human lives. They believed and understood that “what was real could well be an illusion, and that reality might only be the context that people gave to a moment” (31). This understanding of the real or the truth as

a perspective is an eco-cosmopolitan characteristic that capacitates the society to be a non-judgemental whole.

The collective cultural memory of the Adis tribe from where they derive answers to the existential questions is the aspect that makes it a cosmopolitan ideal in union with nature. Ursula. K. Heise in her work *Sense of Place and Sense of Planet* puts forward how a “bio-empathetic receptivity” (17) works among those living in harmony with nature, in an eco-cosmopolitan space. Bio-empathetic receptivity is the psychological ability or condition to identify with nature and the natural. In terms of bio-empathetic receptivity, humans will be capable of understanding and accepting the emotions and pain of the non-human and the natural in equivalent human terms. This kind of receptivity enables the mainstream human sensibility to empathise with the non-human and the ‘non-mainstream human’. The connectedness and fascination felt by Mona and Hoxo’s mother towards each other is an example of bio-empathetic receptivity, where a sisterhood is created not physically, but in the psyche of two mothers, who are connected by their motherly instincts and concerns, irrespective of the cultural differences. On the night before the killing of the python, it is described how Togum felt a sense of uneasiness and grew sleepless. This could be understood as Togum’s premonitory identification with the python’s agony at the time of its death, and thus, substantiates how bio-empathetic receptivity is at work in Pensam. The metaphorical in-between space Pensam, thus, becomes the utopia built on cultural memory accommodating anyone who tries to absorb or rather exist on the threshold of belonging.

Developing rituals and practices to mitigate the misconduct towards nature and towards humans in ways contradicting the mainstream legislature and judiciary is alarming but it is indeed an eco-cosmopolitan alternative as it maintains harmony towards nature, amongst human and the non-human. The previously mentioned instances of Hoxo’s father’s culprit and Kamur, the son of Pinyar the widow, who murdered his child and injured his wife are examples of the same.

The Adis tribe has a powerful space for women. In the mainstream scenario, despite the claim of being a free-thinking society, a woman's plight of being a widow or being heartbroken in love, or happiness in remarriage, are placed under taboo. However, unlike the mainstream cultural society, the threshold of Pensam has an empowered space for women in general. For instance, Pinyar the widow and the widow of Kalen changed in no means when they were widowed. They dressed the same, worked the same, belonged the same within their community. Again, when the impulsive river woman Nenem, the village headman's daughter, Hoxo's wife Losi's mother, in her youth, fell in love with the English officer David, though she had to go through her family's fury, she was not dishonoured, rather she was romanticized as the image of cultural pride, as she attributed her freedom not in escaping to far-off lands to live with her love, but rather in being where she was, breathing her land's spirit, observing the ancient rituals she had known and believed since childhood. Nenem's idea of freedom and love for her native and David's understanding of the same without any inhibition despite loving each other is another shade of eco-cosmopolitan bio-empathy which neither judges nor questions one another's belonging.

Considering all the instances in Mamang Dai's narrative, it could be concluded that Pensam and the legends of Pensam create a space of 'collective belonging', where all kinds of ideas of belonging are accommodated without the mainstream disposition of judgement. The answers and meanings sought from Pensam makes the threshold a space of belonging to those who could possibly be marginalised in the mainstream. The acceptance of all and empathy with nature and the natural makes Pensam an eco-cosmopolitan space of belonging.

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