

Survivance in Mamang Dai's Legends of Pensam and The Black Hill

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Abstract: The lore and legends of indigenous people are embedded with survival stories- against nature including wild animals, diseases, and even fellow human beings. Even in this advanced world full of enhanced technology in the areas of medical and administrative systems the basis of survival still remains the same- adaptability, resistance, and an urge to leave. These instincts amplify manifold when the degree of vulnerability increases. This is also true for every group of indigenous people all over the world. They have been struggling to survive against various agencies such as invasion elimination colonization and modernization their survival always involves a strong protest against any force which tries to modify their original way of living and threaten their existence. This concept has been given name by Gerald Vizenor, a Native American scholar as “survivance”. This is a word made by combining survival and resistance. They face constant struggles globally. They adapt and protest by staying purely connected to their ancestral lands and predictions. They emphasize on their cultural continuity through generational transfer and communal togetherness. This article aims to explore visionary’s concept of survivals in the novels of Mamang Dai set in the northeast Indian tribal regions. Her Legends of Pensam and The Black Hill novels describe the ways of resistance- through oral storytelling and even claiming cultural identity. Their survival aims to provide continuity across generations. It gets transferred through the word-of-mouth oral narratives, folklores, myths, and traditional stories. The interconnected stories in Legends of Pensam provide a non-linear perspective as opposed to the linear and coherent narrative of the colonial historians. The Black Hill presents Kajinsha, the protagonist who is an embodiment of the tribals and their ideology. He makes sure that they do not become the victims of colonial amnesia and their traditions make a significant mark on the tapestry of history.

Keywords: Survivance, Survival, Resistance, Erasure, Cultural Identity

I. INTRODUCTION

Gerald Vizenor, an Ashishinaabe (Native American) scholar and writer, has coined a very important literary concept in contemporary Indigenous theory: Survivance. In his 1993 book, *Manifest Manners: Narratives on Postindian Survivance*, Vizenor defines the concept as, “...an active sense of presence, the continuance of native stories, not a mere reaction, or a survivable name. Native survivance stories are renunciations of dominance, tragedy and victimry.” (p.vii) Mostly, this is a portmanteau of “survival” and “resistance,” and emerges as a symbol of endurance and radicalism against the colonial and contemporary struggles for identity and cultural continuity. He further, describes “survivance” in his 2003 work, “*Survivance: Narratives of Native Presence*” as “Survivance is a condition of resistance and the refusal to vanish” (p.1). It shows that the Indigenous people did not only endure colonial trauma but also courageously asserted their story, language, and deep connection to their land. Many Indigenous literary texts hence, challenge the western ideas and histories that have misrepresented or under-represented them. These texts have repositioned their voices at the centre of cultural, ecological and, political grounds.

The indigenous communities find themselves at crossroads of existence and erasure amplified by climate collapse, land dispossession and cultural loss. The narratives presented by the native authors have become their voices of resistance against these forces of history. ‘Survivance’ is manifested through oral traditions, rituals, collective memory and, ecological knowledge. Vizenor mentions “Survivance creates a sense of natural motion and presence, a continuance of native stories.” (*Manifest Manners*, p.vii) Indigenous authors from different geographies have put their best efforts to ensure that their lives do not get reduced into mere anthropological brackets or documented historical memos. Mamang Dai is a writer, journalist, and former bureaucrat from Arunachal Pradesh. Her novels, which portray characters from Adivasi and hill communities depict ‘survivance’ in Indian context. They are seen negotiating their contested identities, through modernity, displacement, and dissolution of traditions. Her narratives are shaped by British rule in India and post-independence nation building. She tries to capture the nuances of the past which compromised their present status.

This article will explore how Vizenor’s concept of ‘survivance’ animates in the novels of Mamang Dai, elaborating how the characters assert their ‘Indigenous being’ through their deep connection to ecology, and communal memory. Through survivance, which is a combination of Indigenous literary theory and postcolonial ecocriticism, the characters reassert

their belonging and originality where they had lost it - through marginalization followed by violence and sometimes complete erasure. This article aims to broaden the significance of Vizenor's concept into the Indian scenario. Narratives of Indigeneity are often seen as description of trauma and vulnerability or loss of cultural identity rather than stories of dynamic presence and ancient continuity. Vizenor's concept of survivance is the refusal to surrender to the forces of disappearance and foregrounding their own culture to reclaim indigenous agency through subtle and overt forms of resisting, claiming presence and adapting according to the conventional discourses.

This concept will be extended to two novels by Mamang Dai – *Legends of Pensam* and *The Black Hill*. Her novels embody a culturally anchored resilient response to the colonial and post-colonial agency. The indigenous community in India is safeguarded under the constitutional term of scheduled tribes. The tribes notified under article 342 of the constitution of India are recognized as Scheduled Tribes. The criteria for the definition of the Scheduled Tribes are derived from the reports of Lokur Committee (1965). These include "indication of primitive traits, distinctive culture, geographical isolation, shyness of contact with the community at large and backwardness." These defining points prove the antiquity of the livelihoods and continual existence through ages. But instead of seeing these as perseverance, only the suffering side has been considered. They have been surviving since the primeval times because they believe in a communal way of life rather than the individual way of life. Their whole community is involved and responsible for keeping up the traditions with the contemporary changes. Now, as the world faces many global crises, it is important to learn from these indigenous people how to preserve the global community. Hence, this analysis of the concept of survivance in Dai's novels aims to promote the Indian tribal narratives as stories of re – inheritance, re- invention, and refashioning of their cultures to survive and resist agencies of erasure and eradication.

The hills and forests of Arunachal Pradesh preserve the presence of the indigenous voices through myths, memory, and their oral traditions. The hills echo with their enchanting songs and the trees sway with them in their lively dances. By staying rooted in the traditions, these people have rejected victimhood in favour of agency and cultural strength, and hence shown survivance. This is a blend of dynamic continuation through assertion of indigenous identity; denial of vulnerability and cultural erosion and; cultural revitalization through creativity spirituality and communal memory. Dai's novels challenge dominant colonial narratives of Indigenous disappearance through subtle acts of remembering, retelling, and embedding Indigenous knowledge into the purview of literature. 'Survivance' in her novels does not take the rebellious form of resistance but rejects the binary of colonial domination versus their cultural waning. Her people, the Adi people are deeply rooted in cosmology, ecology, and oral traditions in the face of accounts of victimization and disappearance.

Dai's novels challenge the dominant colonial narratives of indigenous disappearance through subtle acts of remembering, retelling, and embedding indigenous knowledge into the purview of literature. "Survivance" in her novels does not take the rebellious form of resistance but rejects the binary of colonial domination versus their cultural waning. Her people, the Adi people are deeply rooted in cosmology, ecology, and oral traditions in the face of accounts of victimization and disappearance. The *Legends of Pensam* offers an interwoven web of tales told by the older people of the Adi tribe who are the static portrayal of relics of a vanished past. The word "Pensam" means the "in-between place". The intricate fragmented narrative style reflects their ingenious way to challenge the linear chronology of colonial history. These stories are carried forward by the elders, wandering poets and sometimes even by the miri, their spiritual guides. Each of them either sings songs or narrate tales which are a part of their great communal memory. "...they were remembered in songs and stories, like the dead." (Dai, 16). Dai shows how togetherness and collective living have ensured their survival through every thick and thin. This adheres to the concept of 'survivance.' "Everyone present knew the story of Biribik, the water serpent. 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)

Characters such as Kapi and Kamur, showcase the deep connection of the people with the spirituality and belief. Kapi, a three-year-old child of the village Yabgo, suddenly goes silent and becomes ill. The parents seek medical help which improves the condition but the child does not get cured completely. Many shamans get summoned, and one of them finds the reason of the silence. It was because the child's father had killed a snake while he was working and not performed proper rites after killing it, the snake's spirit had overpowered the child which made it sick. (Dai, 19-24). This was termed as superstition rather than an act of obeisance to the nature that nurtures them. Maybe the child did not suffer from illness because of this reason particularly, but the father had committed a mistake (of not paying proper respect to the live creature whom he had to kill because his work was being hampered) according to their way of life and hence was getting punished. This amalgamation of their real world and the 'world of spirits' shows their living as being beyond the present. "They understood that it was a nebulous zone that divided the worlds of spirits and men—in fact, at one time men and spirits had been brothers." (Dai, 31)

The eternity of their beliefs and rituals deny to seek oblivion as its destination. Hoxo, a major character is an old, knowledgeable, and revered man in his village. He is the memory keeper in this novel. He shares an incident where their lands were pure, serene, and then suddenly they turn into hotspots of disturbances.

Hoxo then told us that once upon a time there had existed a green and virgin land under a gracious and just rule. The old chieftains received obeisance because they were akin to the gods. No one stole or killed and any man who could find his way into the compound of a chief's dwelling was automatically protected from all danger. In a dispute the chiefs would look up to the sky, consult the sacred fire, speak to the spirits and there would be justice. Food was sown, harvested, stored and dispensed fairly. It was a clan. Fathers and sons followed in the footsteps of their ancestors. But the big trees were brought down. The spirits of our ancestors who dwelt in these high and secret places fell with the trees. They were homeless, and so they went away. And everything had changed since then. The canopy of shelter and tradition had fallen. The wind and the sun burned our faces. We saw a strange new glimmer in the distance. Our footsteps led us down unknown paths. We wanted more. Suddenly we knew more. There was more beyond our poor huts and cracked hearths where we once eased our dreams with murmured words and a good draft of home brew. (Dai, 42-43) Hoxo also adds on that "...but life, he said, had its own pace. Everything, good and bad, was inevitable. 'We need courage and faith in the face of change. That is all we can do.'" (Dai, 43). It shows their denial to perish from the timeline; the Indigenous people are a dynamic presence and continuance rather than passive inheritors of exploitation and cultural discrimination. They always have tried and found their agency back even in the worst of the circumstances. They do not go all loud and pompous, they show their refusal to anything hampering their culture in not-so-obvious ways, such as these interconnected stories that whisk up a novel. It shows that their sustenance is not dependent upon the chronology or historicity of their opposing agencies. Their way of sustaining through difficult times takes up the shape of stories, sometimes poems and even communal dances, "...for the long night of stories, when myth and memory would be reborn in the song of the ponung dancers." (Dai, 50)

Their belief system has always been aligned to surrendering to the invisible supreme power manifested through the nature and its elements. They have always believed that there is a purpose for every life born. These thoughts are similar to the one in Christianity, i.e., the belief system of their colonisers. Yet the belief system of these people is termed as being backward and barbaric. In Christianity, we all need to surrender to the Holy Trinity and we too need to find purpose of our lives. In *Legends of Pensam*, a miri (Shaman) says,

"We are not here without a purpose," the shaman explained. "Our purpose is to fulfil our destiny. The life of a man is measured by his actions and his actions are good if their origin is pure. From nothingness we have come to be born under the stars, and almighty Donyi-polo, the sun and the moon, whose light shines on all equally, is the invisible force that guides each one of us. All life is light and shadow; we live and we die, and the path of destiny is the quest for faith." (Dai, 57)

The colonisers had ruled over the whole world in the past. They made sure to promote their religious beliefs and culture as being superior and hence justified to be dominant. Hence, they sent many people belonging to their countries on missionary missions to the colonies for promoting their religion and belief system. In Dai's *The Black Hill*, the journey of Father

Nicholas Krick, a French missionary shows how this act of the colonisers' gets opposed in a resilient way which paves the way to a continued existence for the people of Mishmee tribe. This journey, this interaction of Krick with protagonists of the novel namely, Kajinsha and Gimur is also a story that the author was attempting to explore. In the Author's Note, she mentions:

I had come in search of another story—about the Mishmi chief who had roamed so independently in the Tibeto-Mishmi border, and who was hung in Dibrugarh jail for the murder of Father Krick and Augustine Bourry. Perhaps it is still all there, I thought. (Dai, 292)

In this novel too, there is an inherited narrative about Kajinsha, who is a chieftain and is an embodiment of the customary existence. His life, as depicted in this novel is woven with the beliefs, myth, oral narratives, and resistance towards any change. He is warrior who chooses to cling on to his tribal ancestry till the end of his life in prison when he gets accused of killing the missionary father Krick and Augustine Bourry. He represents the Indigenous worldview which believes in sacredness of the landscapes and the inseparability of these natural elements with the humans. Father Nicholas Krick comes as a culturally 'outsider' agent. He tries to establish his own religious beliefs, the Christian zeal of spreading out and the colonial need of mapping every bit of land in their colonies. The 'outsiders' brought in with them the technique of record keeping and cartography to draw out the navigable areas. But, they did so according to their whims and fancies. They wrote about the land of the tribals and not about the tribals. They dismissed them as inferiors and almost wiped them off the pages of history. It was the persistent efforts and resolute attempts of the Indigenous people to keep their

traditional tapestry alive; they are still in the larger picture and gaining their voices gradually in recent times. As Kajinsha says to Gimur, his wife before the night of his death, “Tell them about us,” Kajinsha had said to her that night in the jail. “Tell them we were good. Tell them we also had some things to say. But we cannot read and write. So we tell stories.” (Dai, 288).

Here, there is a differential presentation of the colonial and indigenous perspectives regarding the geography. While the indigenous one looks at it as a sacred, living entity tied to its own identity, the colonial viewpoint terms it as potential resources ready to be exploited. “Tribal communities conceive land as a member of the society, a friend, mother, soul of the ancestors and a living entity whereas non-tribal system looks at ‘land’ as something which has only use-value. In the novel, ‘land’ is portrayed as a major character around which they connect the tribal history, their fight against colonial as well as elitist invasion.” (Nair) The land which builds up their identity and livelihood is also a great symbol of denial to colonial amnesia. The period of this novel is set in when the British have just started to explore these north eastern areas of India. The tribes had decided together to never let the British take their lands. “Our numbers are many,” they said. “Who can threaten us? The British may conquer

the world but they will never take our land. The words of the migluns (British) are like a fleabite.” (Dai, 25). The tribes were determined to not allow any kind of strangers into their sacred lands, but some of the people who were the war slaves of the inter-tribal feuds ran away and sought help from the British which led the British to seep into through secret pathways.

Many tribal chiefs with mutual understanding resisted these invasions, and one among them was Kajinsha. Though he was against these interruptions, yet when he met Krick they exchanged a connection that showed how dexterously Dai has contrasted the two cultures. The two opposing forces confront each other on peaceful terms where the futility of the missionary activity is visible. Kajinsha is the living repository of Indigenous knowledge which he has inherited from his ancestors, while Father Krick is the agency of change which would redefine the land, the ancient faith and altogether the identity of the tribals.

“Who do you believe in?” The priest asked.

...

“I believe in life,” he said. “There may be a chief God, yes, but it is better to be friends with all the gods. I do not pray like you, everyday. But we honour our gods when the kambring tells us. At other times we live. We have a life and our lives are also ruled by gods.” (Dai, 139)

He is seen asserting his beliefs and his feeling of land being sacred many times throughout the novel. This can be seen as a move against the spreading of foreign religious beliefs. Vizenor’s ‘survivance’ is represented in the determination of Kajinsha to keep his culture and traditions alive through the next generations.

The fluid, coherent and fixed timelines of colonial historiography is opposed by the interlinked stories representing their oral traditions which have been passed down communally and gets new versions with each narration. The agencies of change never had a sovereignty over the native narratives. In their narratives, rivers, forests, and mountains are characters which live with them rather than resources as seen by the outsiders. The ecological presence of the indigenous people is harmonious unlike the destructive one of the foreigners. Colonial amnesia in *Legends of Pensam* is resisted through stories narrated by communities as a whole repetitively. The colonial records have treated indigenous life as peripheral while their own narratives have their real depictions with their lives in the centre. ‘Survivance’ in this novel is about celebrating own polyvocal narrative structure and regenerating one voice to proclaim the rightful place.

II. CONCLUSION

The *Black Hill* incorporates an actual 19th century event and reimagines it through indigenous lens. This re-telling includes a character which is not even recorded in the colonial archives, Gimur. Kajinsha is also shown as a dominant tribal chief who believes in active resistance yet vouches for transmission of tales through generation to ensure continuity through timelines. He refuses to be a passive victim of colonial history. The land is the space where many intrusions take place: missionary trips, military intrusions, and land mapping. But this land emerges strongly as a part of indigenous identity as the natives are totally in sync with their land-space. The sense of threat to culture and loss of traditions is real in this novel. It is resisted through putting a strong foot forward and denial for encroachment by outsiders. These novels of Mamang Dai demonstrate Vizenor’s ‘survivance’ as a dynamic presence where--great losses turn into legends and are passed on from generation to generation; ancestral voices proclaim and retain the sacredness of the landscapes; and indigenous lives assert their continuity, adaptability, and deep rootedness in the face of historical and colonial amnesia.

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