

Rekindling the Spiritual Reciprocity with 'Place': Reading of Mamang Dai's *The Legends of Pensam* as a Bioregional Expression

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Abstract

Bioregionalism is a perspective which recognizes that the Earth is essentially self-governing, self-regulating and self-healing, and as part of it, we humans are provided with an essential task of rediscovering what a realistic relationship to the rest of planetary life entails. The earth does not present itself alone, but as a uniform global reality which all together constitutes the wide variety of life communities. The human communities are part of this complex of life communities. Our modern technologies have given place to the disruption of life systems existing on the earth and consequently this disruption has led to a severe damage to the integrity of human community to that of his natural world and other life-forms. Bioregionalism proposes a solution which seeks immediate alliance between human and his earth community, and calls to foster physical and spiritual integrity with their bioregions or/and 'place' to which they belong. This philosophy, based on the concept of Bioregions, considers the well-being of the places where humans live to be central and ultimately that natural place becomes part of their sensory experiences. Mamang Dai is a renowned poetess and author from Adi community, residing in Arunachal Pradesh, part of beautiful north-eastern region of Indian subcontinent. She has keen eyes and a poetic heart which is capable of recognizing the spirit of her place and immortalizing its particularity through her craftsmanship. This paper attempts to bring forth the power of her poetic caliber which has given new heights to the place sensibilities and tries to express human's realistic relations to their places. By keeping her novel, *The Legends of Pensam* central to its occupation, this paper also attempts to touch spiritual dimensions of Bioregional philosophy.

Keywords: Bioregion, Spiritual Bioregionalism, Life-Place, Eco-spirituality, Indigenous, Earth Community, Place Consciousness, Living-in-place.

Mamang Dai, one of the leading contemporary Indian writers, hails from Itanagar, Arunachal Pradesh. She was born in the Adi community in Pasighat, East Siyang district of Arunachal Pradesh. A dynamic persona, Dai was the first woman from her state to be selected in Indian Administrative Service in 1979, but later she left the post to follow her interest in journalism. Right from working with *The Telegraph* and *Hindustan Times* to getting appointed an officer at World Wide Fund for nature, where she worked for the Eastern Himalayas Biodiversity Hotspots program, Dai made her remarkable contribution in every possible areas and the field of literature is no exception. The wide range of her literary creations is evident of her

profound literary imagination. Her notable writings include *Arunachal Pradesh: The Hidden Land* (2003) and *Mountain Harvest : The Food of Arunachal* (2004) among non-fictional works; *River Poems* (2004), *The Balm of Time* (2008) *Hambreelmai's Loom* (2014), *Midsummer Survival Lyrics* (2014) among poetry collections; *The Legends of Pensam* (2006), *Stupid Cupid* (2008), *The Black Hill* (2014) and the most recent *Escaping the Land* (2021) among novels; and *The Sky Queen and Once Upon a Moontime* (2003), an illustrated folklore text. Dai was honored with Padma Shri by the Indian government in 2011, and the Sahitya Akademi Award in 2017 for her novel *The Black Hill*.

The Legends of Pensam, the object of current study, shows Dai's profound sense of the mysteries of her bioregion, its dense ecology, traditional ways of survival and sustainability, pristine culture of the land, tribal gods, and indigenous spiritual beliefs that are deeply rooted in the ecology of the place. It is almost structured like a wonderful piece of art consisting diverse mosaics. By putting together multiple narratives which are based in a particular bioregion and diverse in the matter of time, Dai has provided ethnographic details of her spiritual landscape and her ancient tribal 'placelore'. It is "an intricate web of stories, images and the history of a tribe" which is a "lyrical and moving tribute to the human spirit" and a poetically painted "memorable portrait of a land that is at once particular and universal." (Dai, book cover of *The Legend of Pensam*)

Bioregionalism's Spiritual Rhetorics

We all reside in some or the other geographical regions. These are different from each other in terms of their physical, geological and biological singularities. These are unique places, supporting distinct life-systems, soil texture, agricultural patterns, climatic conditions, watersheds, native plants and animals, and many more other distinct natural characteristics beyond human's thinking ability. Each element affects the other and is affected by them. These altogether give rise to certain forms of human cultures and development of particular mode of habitation. In this way a geographical place bearing specific physical and cultural particularity is called 'Bioregion' or 'Life-Places'. Humans are integral part of these life-places. The other life-forms found in a bioregion support our own lives, shape us and our mindscapes by affecting in certain ways thus conferring us our unique identities. If we abide by this identity or succeed to recognize our realistic relationship to the biota of our places, we get connected to the Earth community physically, psychologically and spiritually. The real problem begins with the hegemonic anthropocentric human behavior towards nature, deeply intertwined in materialistic paradigm. It has devalued the ancient cultures, ways and methods of living, recognizing them as too reactive for the progress of humanity. These were ideologically undermined over the period. Indigenous ways and practices across the globe were inspired by the sense of obligation for natural world, rather than constant battling for supremacy over nature and other-than-human species. This devaluing has led real time catastrophic condition which is now seems to be unresolvable. Consequently, many forms of environmentalism have emerged with multiple solutions, some really helpful and some too impractical to consider. Bioregionalism as environmentalism focuses on the elimination of real root causes than solving the entailed problems by them. It is an approach which advocates for the processes of establishing and rekindling a sensitive relationship with specific place and its inhabitants which were central to the pristine ways. Bioregionalist Paul Lindholdt is of the

opinion that bioregionalism “teaches us the means by which we can reinvestigate our living regions and reinvest ourselves” (qtd in Lynch *et al*, 139).

According to Peter Berg, a Bioregion “refers both to geographical terrain and a terrain of consciousness”. By calling it “a terrain of consciousness” he extends its meaning and enlarges its scope. (Andruss *et al*, 36) The conception of place is not only restricted to a geographical territory to inhabit but its values must be upheld in our deeper conscience. Bioregionalism is not merely an environmental and social movement but a philosophical way to live a sacred life in a particular place. David Robertson in his most acclaimed article “Bioregionalism in American Nature Writings”, says, “We can . . . consider a bioregion as a unit of space where, by locating ourselves there, we place ourselves in a physical, mental, and spiritual relationship with the whole.” (qtd in Lynch *et al*, 212) David L. Barnhill says it has “profound psychological and spiritual dimension”, which “reflects properties of the natural world rather than human artifice; a holistic integration of the individual person with that bioregion; and the interconnectedness of physical world, human psychology, and spirituality”. (Lynch *et al*, 212) Consciousness is center to spirituality. In the most comprehensive words, spiritualism refers the connections to our original roots, knowledge of our existence and purpose, recognition of our experiences as beings in this universe. Epistemologies of compassion, love, and gratitude get aligned to it with the deeper delving into its fathoms. Spiritual Bioregionalism advocates knowledge of the reciprocal interdependence of self-community-earth, and seeks urgent recognition of this relation. Spiritual consciousness develops an understanding of human soul with the spirit of the place in which it is immediately present. Thomas Berry, an eco-theologian and eminent Bioregionalist, exploring the relationship of self and community, emphasizes on the discovery of the imperatives of our own being. He says, “The human is less a being on the earth or in the universe than a dimension of the earth and indeed of the universe itself. The shaping of our human mode of being depends on the support and guidance of this comprehensive order of things. We are an immediate concern of every other being in the universe.” (Berry, 195) He clearly mentions here that our ideas and thoughts are operated within a larger universal structure and we as mere species like other ones are nurtured according to natural order of things because humans have no isolated existence.

A Bioregional message given by Haudenosaunee (Confederacy of Indigenous American Nations) says, “...all living things are spiritual beings. Spirits can be expressed as energy forms manifested in matter. A blade of grass is an energy form manifested in matter—grass matter. The spirit of the grass is that unseen force that produces the species of grass, and it is manifest to us in the form of real grass.” (Notes, 85) Their native ideologies are directed by certain principles to attain this state of understanding:

The people who are living on this planet need to break with the narrow concept of human liberation, and begin to see liberation as something which needs to be extended to the whole of the Natural World. What is needed is the liberation of all the things that support Life—the air, the waters, the trees—all the things which support the sacred web of Life. (Notes, 91)

Bioregional spiritualism says that we must express a great respect, an affection, and a gratitude toward all the spirits which create and support Life on the Earth, as well as give a greeting and thanksgiving to the many “supporters of our own lives—the corn, beans, squash, the winds, the sun”. The essential step to attain the spiritual understanding starts with a basic

call to consciousness. (Notes, 86) The message very famously dictates that “Spiritualism is the highest form of political consciousness.” (Notes, 85) Remembering the connections, reweaving the web, creating a space where every sort of diversity is included and honored, thus perceiving our realistic connections with the Earth community is what the spiritual side of Bioregionalism advocates. This must be started from our particular life-places motivated by the dictum ‘saving the whole by saving the parts’.

The Legends of Pensam as Bioregional Expression

Portrayal of a sense of place, imagining it and reimagining our relation with it, the folk narratives, traditions, personal experience of living in it are all forms of bioregional expression. *The Legends of Pensam* chronicles the history, religion, spiritual beliefs, customs and rituals, legends and songs of the Adi community. It highlights modern encroachment into the serenity of the region, degradation of cultural and environmental harmony as well as the metamorphosis of the young tribal mindscapes. Dai maps the ‘placelore’ of her bioregion. The word ‘Pensam’ in the title means ‘in-between’ in the language of the Adis. It is home of the Adi tribe. Dai chooses to enable her readers to taste the native flavor of pronunciation of native words by presenting it phonetically into English rather than using its English translation. She prefers using names of places in their original form only “to convey a sense of place, an aura of identity.” (*River Poems*, V) ‘Pensam’ is a place which:

...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. (Dai, VII)

‘Pensam’ is the territory rich with its unique flora and fauna, spectacular culture and rituals, enigmas and legends spanning generations. It is part of the north eastern bioregion, “homeland of twenty-six tribes with over one hundred and ten sub-clans, each with a different language or dialect”. (Dai, XI) This beautiful land is crisscrossed by rivers and high mountains, divided into river valleys. “The Adis practice an animistic faith that is woven around forest ecology and co-existence with the natural world.” (Dai, XI)

A profound understanding of natural systems is nothing but beginning of developing an understanding of “the self, its common and particular essences—literal self-interest in its barest terms”. (Andruss *et al*, 6) It is the natural world, and the traditions of the natural world that must be prevailed if we are to develop truly free and egalitarian societies rooted in ethics and gratitude. The indigenous cultures adhered to natural systems as models of consciousness. When we forsake the spirit of the natural world, we lose our souls too. The various spirits residing in the natural elements like wind, water, fire and earth—good as well as evil—are the invisible forces which are constant guidance for humans. The legend of Biribik, the water serpent, “fixed in the collective memory of tribe” (Dai, 9); the tiger spirit, which causes fire if unethically provoked; the story of the ‘Aubergine plant’ which grew into the size of a tree, laden with ghostly flowers and fruits with venomous effects which can cause psychopathic effects in humans who come underneath and the recurring dream of ‘Mother Rain’ in tribal conscience are nothing but the instances of Adis’ strong beliefs in the spirit of the natural world. They have consciously set certain structures to discipline their lives and created boundaries for humans to avoid causing disturbances in the natural order of things. In

bioregional discourse it is nothing but “engaging in the work of restoring the earth to good health, “removing the human-centered barriers to the earth healing herself,””. (Andruss *et al*, 100)

The modern intrusion has created upheavals in the lives of the tribe. It is a community who worshipped natural world like a living spirit. Beliefs and values are shattered and the social order is changing rapidly. The novelist’s longings for the past days are best revealed through the words of Hoxo, central character in the novel, “...once upon a time there had existed a green and virgin land under a gracious and just rule. The chieftains received obeisance because they were akin to the gods...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.”(Dai, 42) But now these ways and days of adherence have gone and in the voice of Hoxo, the novelist has raised everyman’s voice who mourns on the loss of roots:

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 sun burned our faces. (Dai, 42)

The oral tradition of storytelling and folklores of the bioregion are best captured through the portrayal of rhapsodists. Myths and memories of the land are reborn through their songs. Tribal history, the pain and suffering are all collected in these songs. Dai asserts here that “these are the stories, rhapsodies of time and destiny”, that must be “guarded”. (Dai, 55) Miri, the shaman and leader of the rhapsodists chants his spiritual verses, narrating the story of the beginning of the world. He says there was only ‘Keyum’ meaning nothingness. It was neither dark nor light, only a colorless, shapeless, and still void. It was a place of remote past but, from this great state of stillness, “the first flicker of thought began to shine like a light in the soul of man...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.” (Dai, 56)

Miri’s words take us to Berry’s concept of ‘Genetic Code’. Berry says we need to take guidance from our genetic coding since it provides “the basic psychic and physical structure of our being. Our genetic coding gives us identity within the web of life- systems as well as guides us throughout the entire course of our existence, a guidance manifested through the spontaneities within us.” These ‘spontaneities’ come in all living organisms from “an abyss of energy and a capacity for intelligible order of which we have only the faintest glimmer in our conscious awareness.” Earth is source of this genetic coding because it carries “the psychic structure as well as the physical form of every living being upon the planet.” Berry says we need to go back to earth, to natural world for it is not separate from us but present in us so immediately that escapes our notice. We need to retain the soul, to recognize the spirit of this Earth as a single living organism. (Berry, 194-5)

Bioregionalists believe that though we as species belong to diverse bioregions but, collectively, all living beings are part of one macro life-system and interconnected to each other. In this system or web each life supports the other in some direct or indirect ways and the supremacy of any one is dangerous. In this modern world of abruption, we need to go to Earth to gain knowledge of our ‘genetic codes’. The spirit of place is always present in us and we need to recognize our roots, and the beginning can be with our particular bioregions,

recognizing its spirit and contextualizing our realistic relation with other life forms. Practicing a spiritual path we may attain solace. *The Legends of Pensam* best shows the interconnectedness of human, psychology and physical world within a bioregion. The Adis believe that “Faith is everything” (Dai, 35) and their strong faith in the natural world of their place, the almighty Donyi Polo (sun and moon), and the spirits of winds, plants, rivers etc. are all evident to it. Pensam is not merely a land or geographical area for the Adis to take shelter but it is a “terrain of consciousness” to them, their destiny where they are born, live and die just to become again the part of the soil of the ‘biome’.

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