



Gendered Ecologies and Ecofeminist Consciousness in Mamang Dai's *The Legends of Pensam*

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Abstract— This paper examines the intersection of gender, ecology, and indigenous epistemologies in Mamang Dai's *The Legends of Pensam*, arguing that the novel articulates a distinctly indigenous ecofeminist consciousness. Set within the ecological and cosmological terrain of Arunachal Pradesh, the text foregrounds women as pivotal custodians of ecological knowledge, ritual practice, and spiritual mediation. By engaging ecofeminist theories alongside indigenous feminist frameworks, the study demonstrates how Dai aligns the feminine with environmental stewardship, relational ethics, and intergenerational transmission of ecological memory. The analysis further contends that the novel critiques the gendered repercussions of ecological disruption, particularly those produced by modernization, militarization, and neocolonial development. Dai's narrative structure, fragmented, mythic, and resonant with oral tradition, mirrors indigenous cosmologies in which human and non-human agencies coexist within a shared ecological continuum. This paper also argues that Dai's work offers a decolonial ecological vision that challenges patriarchal and extractivist paradigms, proposing instead a model of ecological care grounded in indigenous worldviews and gendered ecologies.



Keywords— **Ecofeminism, Environmental Humanities, Gendered Ecologies, Indigenous Epistemologies**

I. INTRODUCTION

Mamang Dai, one of the most celebrated literary voices from Northeast India, brings the ecological and cultural richness of Arunachal Pradesh to the forefront of Indian English literature. A former journalist, poet, and chronicler of indigenous histories, Dai's works often draw upon the myths, landscapes, and oral traditions of the Adi community. *The Legends of Pensam* (2006), her most acclaimed narrative, is a collection of interconnected stories that capture the spiritual ecology, social dynamics, and environmental imagination of the Adi people. Rooted in the rugged terrains, river valleys, and dense forests of Arunachal Pradesh, the novel offers a unique narrative world in which the boundaries between humans, spirits, animals, and landscapes remain fluid and deeply intertwined.

Ecofeminism, as articulated by theorists such as Vandana Shiva, Carolyn Merchant, and Greta Gaard, provides a

critical framework for reading the novel. This theoretical perspective rests on the assertion that patriarchal domination of women parallels the exploitation of nature, and that both forms of oppression are interconnected. Gendered ecologies, an extension of ecofeminist thought, highlight how women's relationships with the environment are shaped by cultural roles, bodily experience, and traditional forms of ecological labor. Within indigenous contexts, these ecological roles become even more pronounced, as women often preserve ecological knowledge through rituals, caregiving practices, and oral storytelling.

Studying *The Legends of Pensam* through an ecofeminist lens is crucial because the novel not only reflects the lived ecological ethics of the Adi community but also foregrounds the centrality of women in sustaining these environmental traditions. In mainstream ecological discourse, indigenous women's contributions have

historically been marginalized or overlooked. Their knowledge, rooted in land, ritual, and oral memory, rarely enters dominant environmental debates shaped by Western scientific or patriarchal perspectives. This invisibilization creates a gap in understanding how indigenous ecologies function and how cultural resilience is maintained in the face of modern pressures. This paper argues that *The Legends of Pensam* embodies a distinct form of indigenous ecofeminist consciousness, wherein women act as custodians of ecological wisdom, mediators of spiritual ecology, and symbolic embodiments of environmental resilience.

II. THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

The theoretical framework for this paper is grounded in ecofeminism, gendered ecologies, and indigenous spiritual ecology, all of which illuminate the intersection between gender, land, and cultural survival in *The Legends of Pensam*. Ecofeminism provides the first critical lens, emphasizing the intertwined oppression of women and the natural world under patriarchal systems. Key thinkers such as Vandana Shiva, Carolyn Merchant, and Greta Gaard argue that patriarchal dualisms, mind/body, male/female, culture/nature, systematically devalue both women and nature. Shiva's *Staying Alive* (1988) highlights how indigenous and rural women are most vulnerable to ecological destruction because their daily survival depends directly on forests, water, and land. Merchant's *The Death of Nature* (1980) critiques the mechanistic worldview that commodified the environment while reinforcing women's subordination. Gaard's intersectional ecofeminism further reveals that environmental harm is inseparable from social hierarchies involving gender, race, and indigeneity. Within this framework, women emerge not only as caregivers but also as spiritual mediators and ecological knowledge keepers.

The concept of gendered ecologies extends ecofeminist insights by showing how environmental interactions are shaped by socially assigned gender roles. In indigenous contexts such as the Adi community, ecological labor is distinctly gendered: women gather medicinal plants, prepare food, brew *si-ye*, maintain home gardens, and manage ritual practices. These activities generate a form of gender-specific ecological expertise that mainstream environmental discourse often overlooks. Through daily engagement with the landscape, women become repositories of ecological memory, shaping sustainable interactions with forests, rivers, and spirits.

Indigenous ecofeminism differs from Western ecofeminism by centering land-based epistemologies, where land is understood as identity, ancestry, and a living

spiritual force. For the Adi people, the natural world is animated by spirits and ancestors, and women play a crucial role in mediating these relationships through ritual, storytelling, and daily practices. Indigenous feminist theorists argue that ecological and cultural disruption stems from both patriarchy and colonialism, making spiritual ecology essential to understanding resistance. In *The Legends of Pensam*, reverence for forests, rivers, and spirits, and the central role of women in preserving these beliefs, reflects an indigenous ecological ethics grounded in memory, ritual, and oral tradition.

Women as Custodians of Ecological Wisdom

In *The Legends of Pensam*, women serve as vital custodians of ecological knowledge and cultural continuity within the Adi community. Characters such as Pinyar, Omum, and Nenang exemplify how women's intimate engagement with forests, rivers, herbs, and rituals forms the basis of indigenous ecological science. Pinyar's healing knowledge reflects this deep connection to the land, as seen in her warning about the misuse of *si-ye*: "It makes men hallucinate... sometimes households forget to observe the rules, and then our men die in the forests" (Dai 48). Her insight demonstrates how ecological understanding, spiritual awareness, and community ethics are intertwined.

Omum's skill in brewing *si-ye*, which requires precise knowledge of seasons, water, and ritual propriety, further symbolizes feminine ecological expertise. These gendered practices, gathering herbs, preparing ritual substances, maintaining home gardens, reveal that women's labor is fundamentally ecological, grounding community life in care, reciprocity, and environmental balance. Women also preserve ecological memory through storytelling. Their myths and warnings articulate the spiritual power of landscapes, as reflected in the tale of Biribik: "I saw a head with horns rising from the river... then the jungle swallowed the noise" (Dai 18). Such stories function as ecological codes of conduct, teaching younger generations to respect sacred spaces, observe taboos, and recognize the agency of non-human beings. Thus, mothers and elder women ensure intergenerational ecological continuity. Through daily embodied practices, cooking, foraging, tending to animals, preparing rituals, they transmit tactile, experiential environmental wisdom that cannot be captured by abstract scientific methods.

Gendered Experience of Ecology

Continuing from the earlier discussion of women as custodians of ecological knowledge, *The Legends of Pensam* deepens this connection by symbolically aligning the female body with the land. The novel's Indigenous ecofeminist framework understands the landscape as a

living, breathing entity, capable of nurturing, regenerating, and sustaining life. Similarly, women's bodies are depicted as sites of fertility, care, and cyclical renewal. These parallels evoke a shared ontology in which both land and women are sacred, generative, and vulnerable to violations. The themes of fertility and regeneration appear not only in childbirth or maternal roles but in the everyday actions women perform to maintain environmental cycles, preparing seeds, fermenting harvests, or invoking ancestral blessings during rituals. Indigenous ecofeminist theorists like Leanne Simpson assert that "the women's body is a site of land-based knowledge and continuity" (Simpson 44), a belief that resonates with Dai's portrayal of female characters who embody both ecological and spiritual vitality. The healing practices of Pinyar or the ritual authority of elder women reflect this regenerative force, suggesting that the health of the community and the land are intertwined through feminine embodiment.

The concept of gendered labor, introduced in earlier sections, becomes central to understanding ecological sustainability in Dai's narrative. Women undertake crucial tasks, agriculture, foraging, brewing (si-ye), and overseeing ritual preparations, each of which requires ecological sensitivity and environmental awareness. This labor is not merely domestic; it is ecological in the truest sense, sustaining the community's relationship with its natural habitat.

Agricultural and foraging activities teach women to observe the timing of seasons, the behavior of animals, and the readiness of plants. Brewing si-ye demands knowledge of water quality, fermentation climates, and ritual propriety. Ritual work, especially offerings to ancestors and river spirits, embeds ethical relationships with the non-human world. As Vandana Shiva notes in *Staying Alive: Women, Ecology and Development* (1998), women's work "sustains biodiversity and ecological cycles through knowledge, care, and reciprocity" (Shiva 97). Dai's narrative illustrates this principle vividly: women's ecological labor is the quiet but vital backbone of communal survival. This gendered work encodes ecological sustainability by ensuring that resources are used respectfully and cyclically rather than extractively. Through their roles, women maintain a cultural logic based on balance rather than domination, aligning closely with ecofeminist values of relationality and care.

Despite their central roles in ecological stewardship, women in this work are also disproportionately affected by ecological disruptions. Deforestation, militarization, modernization, and displacement threaten not only the land but the gendered knowledge systems tied to it. When forests shrink or rivers are polluted, women's healing practices, foraging routes, and ritual activities are directly

impacted. Indigenous ecofeminist theorists argue that environmental degradation constitutes a form of violence against women because it disrupts the land-based roles that sustain their cultural identity (Anderson 116). Dai's narrative reveals this vulnerability implicitly: road-building projects alter the terrain, spiritual sites become inaccessible, and traditional practices, particularly those carried out by women, begin to erode. The disappearance of ecological certainty destabilizes women's authority, diminishing their role as knowledge keepers and disrupting intergenerational transmission. Thus, gendered vulnerabilities in the novel reinforce the broader ecofeminist claim that environmental destruction is inseparable from the marginalization of women. The disruption of ecological balance becomes at once a cultural, spiritual, and gendered crisis.

Ecofeminist Readings of Key Episodes and Symbols

In *The Legends of Pensam*, spiritual beings such as Biribik, ancestral spirits, and forest entities play an important role in mediating relationships between humans and the non-human world. Significantly, it is often women who recognise, interpret, and respond to these spiritual presences. Their attunement to omens, unusual animal behavior, changes in the river, or disturbances in the forest, reflects not superstition but an eco-spiritual literacy cultivated across generations. Women like Pinyar and older matriarchs exhibit a spiritual mediation role, responding to environmental disruptions not through force or ritualized masculinity, but through intuition, negotiation, and relational knowledge. Ecofeminist theorists argue that women often maintain "spiritual continuity with the land" (Merchant 181), a concept reflected in how Dai's female characters honour forest spirits, warn the community of dangers, or perform rituals that bind the human and non-human worlds. The figure of the Biribik, a serpent-like presence associated with ecological imbalance, symbolizes the ecological consequences of violating sacred environmental ethics. Women respond to such disturbances with heightened sensitivity, reinforcing ecofeminist ideas of women as spiritual guardians of ecological equilibrium.

In the Adi worldview presented in *The Legends of Pensam*, the forest, river, and home are gendered as feminine spaces, nurturing, generative, and deeply relational. These ecological spaces embody attributes associated with Indigenous womanhood: sustenance, protection, emotional depth, and intuitive wisdom. The forest functions as a maternal presence, offering herbs, food, ritual materials, and spiritual guidance. Women who forage or heal cultivate a reciprocal relationship with the forest, one grounded in respect and ecological restraint. The river, particularly the Siang, is depicted with feminine qualities

of unpredictability, depth, and emotional resonance. The river's changing moods mirror the emotional landscape of women in the text, especially their responses to loss, separation, and ecological disturbance. Thus, these spaces become extensions of the feminine body, linking ecological vitality to women's cultural presence.

Women's emotional responses, grief, resilience, intuition, form a vital ecofeminist framework in the novel. Their emotions are intimately tied to ecological cycles and disruptions. When forests are threatened, spirits disturbed, or community harmony fractured, it is often women who internalize and articulate the ecological imbalance. This emotional ecology does not signal weakness; rather, it represents an Indigenous strength rooted in relational ethics. Their grief reflects communal loss, while their resilience becomes a strategy for ecological continuity. Ecofeminist scholar Greta Gaard describes in *Ecological Politics: Ecofeminists and the Greens* (1998) such responses as "affective ecological knowledge," where emotions become indicators of environmental change (Gaard 119). In the narrative, women act not only as caregivers but as emotional barometers of the land's wellbeing. Their intuitive reactions serve as early warnings, urging the community to restore balance before the land's wounds deepen. This emotional-spiritual relationship reinforces Dai's ecofeminist message: that the health of women and the health of the land are inseparably linked.

Comparative Indigenous Ecofeminist Perspectives

Placing *The Legends of Pensam* in dialogue with other indigenous literatures highlights both common threads in indigenous ecofeminist thought and the distinctive contributions of Dai's Adi-centered narratives. Comparative reading reveals how indigenous women across geographies act as cultural and ecological anchors, while local particularities, landscape, ritual, colonial history, shape the specific forms their ecofeminist practices take.

Across a range of indigenous texts, women frequently function as custodians of knowledge, ritual specialists, and moral stewards of land-based community memory. For instance, Leslie Marmon Silko's *Ceremony* (1977) centres on Laguna Pueblo storytelling and the ceremonial labor that restores harmony between people and land; Linda Hogan's *Solar Storms* (1994) foregrounds Chickasaw women whose kinship with rivers and wild places anchors communal survival; Oodgeroo Noonuccal's poems lament dispossession and insist on relational obligations to Country. In each case women's embodied practices, ceremony, healing, song, ritual, are the mechanisms through which ecological wisdom endures.

The Legends of Pensam shares these features: Dai's women keepers brew, heal, tell stories, observe taboos, and mediate spirit-land relations. Like Silko's and Hogan's protagonists, Dai's female figures enact resilience through cultural continuity rather than overt political confrontation. Yet the local inflections differ: Dai's landscape is the Siang valley and the eastern Himalaya's river-forest matrix, its cosmology populated by Adi spirits, rites, and taboos. These particulars, specific rituals (such as si-ye brewing), serpent lore (Biribik), and the social forms of Adi kinship—distinguish her contribution from other indigenous literatures while echoing shared ecofeminist logics.

Universally, indigenous ecofeminism tends to rest on several interlinked premises: (1) relational ontology (land and people in reciprocal kinship); (2) women's centrality in maintaining subsistence, ritual, and oral transmission of ecological knowledge; and (3) the critique of extractive, patriarchal, and colonial development models that sever people from place. These elements appear across continents because many indigenous societies configure social life around place-based responsibilities and long-term stewardship practices. Specificity emerges in cosmology, ritual repertoire, gender organization, and historical context. For the Adi world Dai depicts, snake- and river-spirits, hunting taboos, rice-beer culture, and the memory of road- and expedition-era disruptions form a distinctive matrix. Elsewhere, the spiritual registers (e.g., Anishinaabe water protocols, Yolngu songlines, Pueblo kachina practices) shape how women's ecological roles manifest. Thus, while ecofeminist principles traverse cultures, they are always reworked through local knowledge systems and histories.

Dai's work contributes to global conversations about gendered ecologies in several important ways. First, it expands the geographical and aesthetic range of indigenous ecofeminist literature by centering the northeastern Indian highlands, a region underrepresented in anglophone environmental humanities. Second, it demonstrates how oral-form aesthetics (fragmented narrative, tale-frames, embedded myths) function as ecological archives; the book thus offers methodological insight for scholars seeking to recover embodied, non-textual knowledge in digital or archival projects. Third, by foregrounding quotidian female practices, brewing, childcare, herb-gathering, ritual maintenance, *Pensam* insists that ecological stewardship is not only ceremonial or spectacular but quotidian and gendered. Eventually, Dai shows how postcolonial pressures (roads, militarization, resource extraction) reconfigure gendered ecological roles; her novel thereby links local gendered experiences to global patterns of neocolonial environmental change.

Thus, the comparative perspective situates *The Legends of Pensam* within a transnational lineage of indigenous ecofeminist texts while underscoring its singular contributions: a localized cosmology of river–forest relations, a literary form that preserves oral ecological memory, and a subtle politics that treats women's everyday practices as frontline acts of environmental care and resistance.

The preceding analysis has demonstrated that *The Legends of Pensam* offers a richly layered indigenous ecofeminist vision in which ecology, gender, and spirituality are deeply intertwined. Through its portrayal of women as custodians of ecological knowledge, mediators of spiritual relationships, and practitioners of gendered ecological labor, the novel reveals how the Adi community's survival depends on women embodied and relational wisdom. By foregrounding these roles, Mamang Dai challenges dominant patriarchal and developmentalist frameworks that marginalize indigenous women's voices and erase their ecological contributions.

Central to this analysis is the recognition that Dai's narrative is rooted in land-based epistemologies, in which forests, rivers, spirits, and human communities exist in reciprocal relations. Women serve as carriers of oral traditions, protectors of sacred ecological boundaries, and interpreters of environmental signs. These elements affirm that the novel constructs a distinctly indigenous ecofeminist consciousness, one shaped not by theory alone, but by lived experience, ritual practice, and communal memory. Dai's fragmented storytelling, mythic structure, and emphasis on intergenerational transmission underscore the critical role of oral tradition as an ecological archive. By situating women at the center of ecological continuity and resilience, *The Legends of Pensam* challenges mainstream environmental narratives that often privilege scientific, masculinist, or extractive models of environmental understanding. Instead, it offers a vision in which emotional ecology, ritual continuity, and everyday acts of care form the foundation for sustainable living. This work stands as a powerful testament to the inseparability of land, womanhood, and cultural memory. Its ecofeminist insights not only enrich the environmental humanities but also offer pathways for reimagining sustainable futures grounded in indigenous wisdom and gendered ecological care.

III. CONCLUSION

Mamang Dai's *The Legends of Pensam* offers a distinctly indigenous ecofeminist vision in which women, land, and community are deeply interconnected. Rooted in land-based epistemologies, the novel portrays forests, rivers,

spirits, and human life as coexisting within reciprocal ecological relations. Women emerge as central carriers of this worldview: they preserve oral traditions, guard sacred ecological boundaries, and interpret environmental signs that shape community ethics. Their healing practices, ritual labor, and storytelling form a living ecological archive that sustains cultural memory and environmental balance. By foregrounding women as custodians of ecological wisdom, the novel challenges mainstream environmental narratives that privilege scientific or masculinist frameworks. Instead, it highlights emotional ecology, relational care, and everyday practices as foundations for sustainable living. Dai's fragmented storytelling and mythic structure reinforce the importance of intergenerational knowledge transmission, emphasizing that ecological resilience is rooted in cultural continuity. It contributes significantly to the environmental humanities by illuminating indigenous ecological ethics and gendered knowledge systems. It invites readers to reconsider sustainability through the lens of indigenous women's experiences, offering a powerful model of ecological care grounded in reciprocity, memory, and spiritual ecology.

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