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Gendered Cultural Spaces in Mamang Dai's *The Legends of Pensam* and *Stupid Cupid*

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Abstract: Women in Northeast India is always homogenized and considered as the 'Other' in the conceptualized spectrum of the nationalized space in India. Their voices are subdued and their presence is treated sabbatical. But Mamang Dai's indigenous characters stand out vigorous with every turn of pages. Even though their narratives are evaluated under marginalized lenses but their resistance to stay silent and their noiseless attempt to carve out their own identity marks a historic progress in the Northeastern Indian literature. Dai's women characters are pushed to a harsh liminal zone but the brave women personalities robustly accept challenges by designing the limited space with their own unique cultural pursuits and reversing the patriarchal paradigmatic structures to their own distinct realms of gendered spatial patterns. Whether it is Nenem, Arsi and Sisiri from *The Legends of Pensam* or Adna, Mareb and Jia from *Stupid Cupid*, all the native bold ladies from the serene homeland of Arunachal Pradesh transgress a ritualistic passage of separation and incorporation and ultimately engross in a revamping cultural transformation. Thus, balancing between social barriers and gender fluidities, this paper is an earnest attempt to highlight the cultural liminal spaces of women characters in Dai's two specific texts *The Legends of Pensam* and *Stupid Cupid*.

Keywords: Marginalized, liminality, cultural spaces, Northeast, gender.

Introduction

The Map of India locates the snubbed area of Northeast as a zone detached from the mainland and tied with the narrow Siliguri corridor commonly known as the Chicken Neck. The area incorporates multiple varieties of indigenous societies migrated from the borderland countries like Tibet, Bhutan, Myanmar and Bangladesh drawing an unique cultural pattern and drafting a conglomerated hybrid space inclining towards transnationalism. In this context renowned journalist from Manipur Patricia Mukhim states that the region of Northeast "shares only two per cent of its boundary with India and the remaining 98 per cent is bordered by other countries...in terms of their physical features, ethnicity, culture, food habits and language" (Sarkar &



Rai, 2022, p. 66) there is a closer affinity with people of Southeast Asia than the people of Northeast India. This makes a clear cultural differentiation between Northeast and the other parts of India. However, even though women are maltreated or victims of patriarchal strategies at most of the areas of Northeast India but the best part to involve is the matriarchal and women liberation strategy that certain states of the region solely follow and leave a distinguished impression away from the rest of the masculinized states of mainland India. Mahanta and Nayak (2013) make a special observation with the states of Northeast which is exempted from horrific social crimes and features an egalitarian world for both men and women:

The region is multiethnic with heterogenous cultural background and different from mainstream homogenous culture...women of the region are relatively much liberal than the rest of the country...unlike Northern, Southern, Western and Eastern part of India the entire Northeastern region is free from social evils like dowry, *sati pratha*, female feticide and female infanticide (p. 5).

Mamang Dai originated from Itanagar, Arunachal Pradesh and identified herself as a woman from the Adi tribal community. She is the proud holder of the prestigious Padmashree Award, Sahitya Akademi Award and the Verrier Elwin Award. She also stands as the former Civil Servant of the country cracking the IAS exam but she withdrew her choice of being a government servant and intruded into the career space of being a litterateur and philanthropist. Also Dai is the first woman writer from her state who attempts to pen down of the struggles and cultural traditions of her community but Dai expresses discontent as her mother tongue Adi is a non-scripted language, she can't jot down her thoughts "...it is still not a perfect scenario mainly because of the language as we don't have any script due to which they are not writing in their own mother tongue, and one feels uncomfortable writing in English or Hindi" (Patsani 2024).

In an interview with Jyoti Prodhani and Urvashi Kulhad (2022), Dai admits her women characters to accept the center spaces of her novels and even though they are part of the patriarchal society facing forced marriages and child marriages, but the structure of the society is changing, "I have always felt women are the most enduring... I have a close connection with my sisters, cousins' kith and kin, so I find them the most fascinating to look at womanhood who do things, who endure, who fulfill obligations who want more but can still laugh about not having it..." (p. 6). In the state of Arunachal Pradesh women are treated inferior compared to men with the stereotypical mentality constituting, "The source of history is evident women were



bound to live under the suppressed dominating attitudes of male counterparts for different aspect of their biological as well as socio-economic position in dwelling within the same society.” (Dutta et. al, 2021, p. 56) Thus, strong gender biasness is developed where the male counterpart holds a strong dominating status in comparison to female folks in the traditional tribal community. To analyse on gender cultural spaces, it is important to comprehend the theory of space that best matches with the concept of liminality.

The term ‘liminality’ owes its derivation to the Latin word *limen* which means ‘threshold’ or ‘margin’. French ethnographer Arnold van Gennep is the first individual, who gives birth to this term ‘liminality’, in his work *Le Rites de Passage*, in 1909 in Paris. Gennep selected the word ‘liminality’ to indicate the transitional positions resulting in various situations. Basically van Gennep analysed the ceremonies of an individual’s “life crisis” which he called *rites de passage*. He highlighted out that the activities associated with the ceremonies of an individual’s must be examined in terms of order and content and can be further distinguished into three major phases: separation, transition and incorporation. According to Thomassen, who writes in the ‘Introduction’ of his book *Liminality and the Modern: Living through the In-between* (2014), liminality can be indicated to moments of transition during which the normal limits to thoughts and practices are relaxed, opening the way to creativity and imagination, construction, and destruction. Paula Townsend (2000), in her paper, “Gendered Space? An exploration of the gendered meaning and experience of ‘home’ in contemporary British society” examines the complexities of gender relations within the home. According to her, “‘home’ is something individual to each of us; we all have our own idea of what we associate with home” (p. 41). For some, home means a country of origin, for others a certain region or town or even a geographical space. Home is defined as a dwelling place in which people stores emotional affinities through shared history, memories and a sense of familiarity in a known territory. And inside the home, the space is treated differently for different genders for example traditional ideologies view the home as a private realm for women, and a public realm predominantly for man.

Professor Daphne Spain (1993), in her paper “Gendered Spaces and Women’s Status” analyses how compared to men women have lesser access to knowledge and space and how space is associated with gender stratification, where she writes that anthropologists, biologists, psychologists, and sociologists have derived an outcome where “man’s status is almost universally higher than that of women” (p. 138). According to her



research on spatial perspective, “women’s status is a result of a variety of cultural, religious, and socio-economic factors,” (p.138) and men perpetuates the stratification of gendered space by making women’s access lesser to socially valuable assets and education. Homi K Bhabha, in *The Location of Culture*, questions the existence of border as the place from which a new identity or presence is marked. Bhabha analyses that ‘beyond’ is neither “a new horizon, nor a leaving behind of the past,” (p. 2). Dai’s novel *The Legends of Pensam* (2006) is a lyrical web of short stories that catches the routinized life of the peripheral women from the Adi tribes, who when pushed to the margin gets surrounded in a mysterious life between transcendence and immanence, between tradition and modernity and between joy and sorrow. Dai expresses her dissatisfaction with the ‘change’ that modernity has brought intact to it, erasing the traditional roots and this finds its best evidence with Dai illustrating the meaning of ‘Pensam’ in the very beginning of the novel:

In our language, the language of the Adis, the word ‘Pensam’ means ‘in-between’. It suggests the middle, or middle ground, but it may also be interpreted as the hidden spaces of the heart where a secret garden grows (p. vii).

Bhabha’s *The Location of Culture* marks the importance of borderland areas giving birth to a unique form of identity and cultural recognition Dai explicitly states of the hidden territory of her motherland bordering three separate countries “Bhutan, China and Myanmar...is the homeland of twenty-six tribes with over one hundred and ten sub-clans, each with a different language or dialect” (p. xi), and her association with the land is unambiguous with the line, “I was born in the mountains, in a village where boys kicked rocks pretending at football.” (p.3) Dai’s statement elaborates the fact, that there is no end at the borderland territory of her ‘home’ predominantly wavering between India and Tibet, but a very prominent presence begins beyond the boundary line or places the mark of a unique cultural signature right after the imaginary borderline.

The character Omi who resides in the Duan village admires her husband’s multicultural cooking style mixing the East and West style “God knows how he enjoys it, but he is always trying some new combination” (p.175), this shows how modern men in Arunachal are accessible to the space of kitchen and addresses a role reversal process where men cooks and women enjoys eating. The same character Omi manifests her dissatisfaction with the domestic culture of village life and the advantageous life of the town where rice,



lentils, oils and all other products are purchased directly from the markets whereas in the hills, all grains and vegetables like beans and cabbages are cultivated in the domesticated spaces of the individual villagers, and it is leading to health problems like back pain. These descriptions clearly indicate the tribal women characters' psychological liminal desires, where they wish to live a health protected life, but at the same juncture, they are not willing to give up their traditional roots. Nenem stands in a transitional state when her father forcefully sends her in a Christian school to take modern education, "The thing she had been most frightened of in the school was that her soul might shrink, or be altered forever, and that she might never see the river again" (p. 96). Thus, Nenem is caught in an acme on insecurity with her school life, it is nature, only through which Nenem tries to attain her inner solace or regain her security. Again, Dai's character Sirsiri encompasses herself with a liminal dilemma, as she works in the radio but the tribal mentality envelopes her to get married, opening Sirsiri's life in between city demands and tribal practices, "She had other dreams, and no matter where she was, she always wanted to be elsewhere" (167).

Gendered fixated schedule is aptly notified by the rules of the ancient customs prescribed in the Adi tribal socio-cultural structures. Fire watching is considered a sacred duty among the tribes and the same ritual fixes gender centric activities for both men and women like the young men of the Adi group are expected to keep vigilance at the night and to assemble at a fixed place "in the Bango or the boy's dormitory" (p. 121) which can also be considered as critic Lefebvre's 'lived space' where they are not referred to as the spaces themselves but to something else like the symbols of a divine power, the logos, the state, or a masculine labelled area. Interestingly, the same fire watching duty is allocated to the women during the prescribed time of day throwing light to the transitoriness of the liminoid structures implied in the ancient lifestyle and the modern lifestyle. On one level, the customary practice of the society indicates fire watching as a leisure activity and on another level, card playing is the grandest leisure activity assigned in the modern era, involving men and women compete day and night, shoulder to shoulder forming card groups by "deserting their homes, offices and shops, even their small children" (p. 165). Therefore, the card playing forms an interstitial passage opening a new space for men and women to be treated equally in the patriarchal paradigmatic structures of appointed gender roles.



The character Arsi feels strenuous lifestyle in the hills, where she have been in the forest all morning cutting wood, cracking dry bamboo and piling stray branches compelling her straining muscles weep, “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!’”(p. 74) Merely, Arsi’s quest is to drive her life in the modern way, by taking education in the reputed institutions of the town, she wants to give up village and taste the life of the town, as she says in her next life she wants to be a bird and “live properly, for instance. Speak English” (p. 75). But her desire to adapt contemporary living was a prohibition in the ancient mythical paradigms structured by the society and this echoes women’s inferior status compared to men with the words of narrator’s friend, who claims that many years back her mother had sent her to take education in the distant cities but “Education is of no value”, (p. 82) education loses its worth in front of the ancient traditions set for women, Me-me suggests Arsi, on her desire for studies, “You must marry. A woman’s marriage beads and the obligations she fulfills as wife and mother are the true measure of her worth” (p. 76). The incident suggests how tribal women are prone to settle within the limited cultural spaces of the society like archetypically getting married or having children compared to the tribal men who are allowed to venture in the glittering academic and business world of the town.

The structure of Dai’s novel *Stupid Cupid* is drafted acutely drawing a spatial gap between two particular locations of the country, the national capital or the heart of the nation Delhi, and an ignored state at the country’s extreme Northeastern territory linked by the ‘Chicken neck’ a “thin strip of land which connects Northeast with the rest of India” (Chamling, 2020, p. 7) and also bordering the neighbouring nations. From the same ignored land the protagonist Adna arrives getting separated from her motherland Itanagar to getting incorporated to the mainland India from where a transitional rite begins. Dai’s novel is set beyond the regional boundaries in the national capital, where the indigenous population from Northeast becomes the ‘outsider’ within the same demarcation of national space, “The stigma of rejection and alienation becomes evident in the various encounters between the people from northeast and mainland India”. (Biswas & Das, 2021, p.76) Being a girl from the Eastern Himalayan ranges and a place that receives “the first rays of the millennium sun in mainland India”, (Dai, *Oral Narratives and Myth* p.1) Adna is unable to adjust and finds it difficult to survive



in the pollution friendly over-populated city life of Delhi, as she says, “And it’s so polluted! All the history is gone. It is a crumbling city. There is no more culture” (Dai, 2009, p. 12).

The exodus of the people from Northeast to Delhi often results in the differences of the sacred and the profane zone. The indigenous natives are often embraces to racial prejudices and uncomfortable situation while encountering the people from the mainland India. Such an incident is visible when Adna’s cousin Jia undergoes liminal complexity, when a Delhiite woman thrashes her while boarding a cab, “Hey you! Jao! JAO! Go back to your own...DESH!” (p. 52) This proves that Jia is being rejected as a citizen from the same national space India and thus, she falls in the category of profanity. According to Debajyoti Biswas & Rupanjit Das (2021), “the problem of acceptance and rejection are not limited to one place but is seen as a strategy to maintain the homogeneity of a community at one place” (p. 76).

Critic Paula Townsend (2000) finds political groups and individuals holding various alternate views of ‘home’ emanating within the physical demarcation of the private sphere, as she puts, “Feminists see the home as the locus of gender dominance and female exploitation”, (p. 41) and according to the socialist perspective, home becomes an obstacle to collective life and a setting where capitalist social relations are reproduced. Dai highlights in her text, the very thought of women’s mental spaces, where on one hand they wish to be independent financially and become mentally strong but on the other hand, when they start fantasizing about their love life, they immediately possess the idea of gender spaces, “And because we were from staid middle-class families, this image naturally modified itself into a married condition with the handsome husband as breadwinner and good, sweet, capable me doing all the rest” (p.10). This, aspect highlights women’s workspaces are operated differently compared to men. Men are trained to take financial responsibility of the home and women are groomed to take all domestic responsibilities of the private realm. And this stereotypical social difference is directly questioned by Dai, when Adna asks Amine, “Do you think it helps if the man is the provider and the wife is the stay-at-home type and a good homemaker?” (p.11).

Conclusion

Mamang Dai through her specific novels *The Legends of Pensam* and *Stupid Cupid* emphasizes on the status of women of her state. Women in Arunachal are somewhere liminal in their cultural patterns. It is observed women are educated and working shoulder to shoulder with men but in terms of spatial sharing there

is still a major difference between men and women. Men are more liberated and free compared to women who are still undergoing a life under the stringent patriarchal policies. Women like Adna, Mareb or Jia are although venturing into the outside world and entering the professional world of mainland India but the differences in culture and lifestyle techniques are creating a barrier between the women of mainland India and the women of Northeast India. Tribal women are maltreated and subjected to exploitation under the hands of men from the mainland India and such an example is explicitly drawn from the protagonist Adna's life who falls in love with a married man and the married man secretly runs a relationship with Adna, knowing the future that it is uncertain and Adna and the man can never be together in future. But at the same side, it is examined how love and friendship is making a liminoid zone for both the mainlanders and the indigenous natives.

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