

# AMBIVALENCE AND RESISTANCE: THE COMPLEXITIES OF POSTCOLONIAL AGENCY IN MAMANG DAI'S THE LEGENDS OF PENSAM

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## ABSTRACT

A powerful voice in Indian Anglophone fiction and Postcolonial literature, Mamang Dai spotlights Postcolonial themes throughout her corpus like no other. Ostensibly, she treats local and indigenous issues; however, an in-depth analysis of her structures prefigures her as a voice of the voiceless marginalized, Dalits, subalterns and the oppressed social classes. Dai projects Northeast India as exotic Other in terms of culture, social setting and thought patterns. Her novel, *The Legends of Pensam*, highlights the significance of indigenism and nativism; however, at the same time, her focus is on the colonizers and truly inclined towards colonial legacies as well. Consequently, it creates various ambivalent and in-between spaces. The present study, therefore, critiques her novel as an ambivalent text: simultaneously directed against colonial as well as aboriginal legacies in terms of culture, religion, race and language. The study concludes that the novel projects religious, cultural, social, racial and linguistic ambivalence and the ambivalent behaviours of the colonized towards the colonizers. The present work exploits qualitative mode of inquiry where textual analysis and close-reading have mainly been focused up to last possible extent. As for the hermeneutics of the study is concerned, Homi K. Bhabha and Frantz Fanon's theory of ambivalence has been applied as theoretical and critical tool to give fresh interpretations to Dai's scholarship by new modes of reading.

**Keywords:** Post-colonialism, Ambivalence, Hybridity, Mimicry, Resistance, Third Space

## INTRODUCTION

Dai is a prominent novelist from Northeast India. She portrays the culture, tradition and nativity through fiction. The novel depicts cultural, religious, racial, linguistic, and emotional/psychological fluctuations of the aboriginal tribes which were once colonized by the white men. Pathetically, the legacies of colonialism are still prevalent in the entire subcontinent. The legacy is deep-rooted and almost all the writers from former British colonies deal Postcolonial angsts: issues of indigenism; tradition and modernity; power

dynamics; the exact location of culture; decolonization or whatsoever.

The historical account of European colonization is, arguably, one of the brutal subjections of the aboriginal peoples in human history. The core aim of colonization was to subvert, exploit and marginalize the aboriginal/indigenous peoples of the world and to make colonies there in the indigenous lands. Colonialism, by its very definition, is the conquest and control of other peoples' lands, goods, and even their mental universe (Loomba 8).

The methodology followed in the present work is qualitative. The content analysis has extensively been made before closing inference. The theoretical lens for the analysis of the novel is Homi K. Bhabha and Frantz Fanon's theory of ambivalence. The concept of ambivalence was first introduced in Psychoanalysis by Sigmund Freud, and later on it was popularized by Homi K. Bhabha in Postcolonial Studies/discourse. Ambivalence is the state of fluctuation or a limbo position where the colonized are simultaneously attracted to the behaviour and cultural legacies of the colonizers and at the same time longing for their aboriginal/indigenous legacies. Resultantly, it creates intrinsic and extrinsic turmoil in the minds of the colonized. Robert Young defines the concept of ambivalence in these words: "The term first developed in psychoanalysis to describe a continual fluctuation between wanting one thing and wanting its opposite. It also refers to simultaneous attraction towards and repulsion from an object, person or action"(161). Regarding ambivalence, Kenneth Veisbrode goes further and states: "One of the first demonstrations of ambivalent behaviour for a number of people is with taste. For instance, do I want that extra piece of pie? Do I need that diamond ring? Of course we want these things" (5). He argues further: "Between wanting and doing— desires and actions— lies ambivalence" (5).

Ambivalence, incorporated into Postcolonial discourse theory by Homi K. Bhabha, describes the complex mix of attraction and repulsion that characterizes the relationship between the colonizer and the colonized. The relationship is ambivalent because the colonized is never simply and completely opposed to the colonizer. Rather than assuming that some colonized subjects are 'complicit' and some 'resistant', ambivalence suggests that complicity and resistance exist in a fluctuating relation within the colonial subjects. In Homi K. Bhabha's theory, ambivalence, coupled with third/liminal space, is the threshold where colonized subjects mimic the colonizer, but fail to adapt the exact identity of the colonizer and, hence, create a hybrid position. Pramod Nayar explains it further:

Liminality indicates spaces and conditions of transitions, in-between spaces where identities are not fully formed. The term was theorized in the early stages of Postcolonial Studies by Homi

K. Bhabha as a space where colonized is seeking to escape the identity of the colonial subject and move towards the identity of white man, but has not yet acquired the white man's status/state. 'Liminal' is a term used to capture the uncertainty, instability and disorder of this space as well. For Bhabha the liminal is what resists the hierarchy, upsets the social order (98-99).

It is evident from the above argument that the colonized subjects, albeit, mimic the identity, cultural practices and values of the colonizer and yet they can't wholly adapt the identity of white man and, thus, they escape to a space ambivalently which is hybrid. The colonized, moreover, are neither fully in the color of the colonizer nor in their own aboriginal one, but in an identity which is a mixture of both, which is, for Bhabha, a symbol of dual formation (122). Bhabha goes even further and argues that the stairwell as liminal/third space becomes a process, symbolically, for the interaction and discourse and the linking substance that puts up the dissimilarity between high and low, black and white (5). For both Bhabha and Fanon, the colonized are ambivalent and neither they fully adapt the identity of neither their colonial masters nor their own indigenous ones, therefore, they escape into a liminal space. However, for Fanon, the ambivalence creates a very crucial psychological problem and that shapes the very unconscious of the colonized. Regarding this psychological problem of the colonized, identified by Fanon, Bhabha says that the colonized subjects have double identity and the psychoanalytic problem that owes much to the question: 'What does a man want?' (72). Fanon exposes ambivalence in this way: "However painful it maybe for me to accept this conclusion, I am obliged to state it: for the black man there is only one destiny. And it is white" (*Black Skin* 4). Frantz Fanon was actually a psychiatrist and it was he who for the first time identified this psychoanalytic/psychological problem of the colonized while treating his patients. Owing to the ambivalent behaviours, his patients were suffering from inferiority complex and other psychological problems. About the psychological problem of his patients, Fanon laments: "My patient is suffering from inferiority complex. His psychic structure is in danger of disintegration. What has to be done is to save him from this and, little by little, to rid him of

this unconscious desire” (*Black Skin* 76). Fanon states that how the brutal subjection by the white man causes critical and dangerous psychological problems to the colonized, apart from physical pain. The suffering and ambivalent behaviours of the colonized is now understandable because it is solely indebted to a mechanism and that is only psychological one (*Black Skin* 91).

### Dai’s Handling of Linguistic and Racial Fluctuations

British colonization was heavily influenced by language as it played a key role in shaping educational, social, cultural, and political contexts. In the field of Postcolonial Studies, language is recognized as a critical component as it both constitutes and communicates knowledge across various disciplines such as geography, economics, history, culture, and politics. (Ashroft et al 283). The colonizers used language as a tool to locate, relocate, and dislocate the identities, languages, social values, political systems, educational systems, and belief systems of indigenous peoples in order to justify their colonization. Therefore, language is fundamental to post-colonial discourses as the colonial process itself is initiated through language (Ashroft et al 283).

Postcolonial writers use the language of the colonizers to communicate with their readers, while simultaneously challenging the linguistic superiority and imperialism inherent in the Standard English or Queen's English. This challenge involves an ambivalent position for the writer, which includes both abrogation and appropriation of Standard English. For example, Mamang Dai writes in the language of the colonizers, but also incorporates words from indigenous languages. This includes a variety of techniques, such as syntactic fusion (deviation from standard grammar or syntax), transliteration, glossing, code-switching (inter-sentential, intra-sentential, inter-word), and code-mixing. Thus, in doing so, such an act creates an ambivalent atmosphere as in the words of Ismail Talib: “So the relationship of Empire to English literature, and subsequently, to literature in English, can be said to be ambivalent, and can’t be wholly seen in a positive light” (8). Similarly, in terms of culture, Dai simultaneously praises the thought-patterns, values, customs, and other aspects of the colonizers’ culture while also

expressing an affinity for the indigenous culture of India, particularly that of the Adi tribe. This creates an in-between position for Dai, where she inhabits a space between two cultures and must negotiate her identity and artistic expression within this complex framework.

In addition to linguistic ambivalence, Dai also explores cultural ambivalence at length. Her work reflects a mixed and confused atmosphere of both the colonizers’ culture and the indigenous culture of India. The novel, unlike other genres, is arguably more open to exploring the cultural, social, and political dimensions of society. Therefore, cultural influences are fundamental to literary texts, particularly novels, and provide the foundation for the creation of literary works, as Edward Said in *Culture and Imperialism* aptly states: “I am not trying to say that the novel—or the culture in the broader sense— “caused” imperialism, but that the novel, as a cultural artefact of bourgeois society and imperialism are unthinkable without each other” (70). As with many other postcolonial writers, Dai’s *Pensam* reflects a complex relationship with the culture of the colonizers, at times embracing it and at other times rejecting it in favour of her indigenous culture.

In *Pensam*, Dai intentionally subverts the linguistic superiority of the colonizers. She incorporates untranslated or transliterated words from the local or indigenous languages and does not italicize them. Additionally, she writes the titles and subtitles of the stories with lowercase letters and employs syntactic deviations to challenge the norms of Standard English. For example, the title of the novel *Pensam* carries an indigenous connotation. The word *Pensam* is not an English word, but rather directly borrowed from the Adi language, which is the novelist’s native language. Dai, in the very beginning of the novel, explains the title in these words: “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 the secret garden grows” (7). Likewise, the novel’s titles and subtitles also deviate linguistically from Standard English. For instance, there are four main titles and nineteen subtitles and all of them are written in lowercase letters such as ‘a diary of the world’ which carries the subtitles ‘the boy who fell from the sky’,

‘pinyar, the widow’, ‘small histories recalled in the season of rain’, ‘the silence of adela and kepi’ so on and so forth. Thus, through all these linguistic techniques, Dai subverts the use of Standard English language. Additionally, apart from incorporating words from indigenous languages, she also adds a local flavour to the novel's setting by creating characters and places that are local to the region. Via an email to me, Dai further clarifies: “The title of the book has the Adi word-*\*Pensam\**. Other words like *\*tapon\*-bat*, are explained in the book, as are a few other words, but can’t remember them off hand. Place names, characters are Adi” (Personal Communication, January 29, 2023).

On another occasion, when Dai narrates the story of Hoxo and his father, she directly uses a word of Persian language in order to create a complex linguistic construct and dip the colonial masters: “Tah! How can it be! ‘I tell you, I saw it! What did it look like?’ ‘I thought I saw a head with horns.’ ‘What!’” (18). Likewise, in the narration of the serpent ritual, Dai again uses the word ‘Biribik’ from Adi language: “Everyone present knew the story of Biribik, the water serpent” (Dai 18). The words “Tah” and “Biribik” have been borrowed directly from Persian and Adi languages. She also uses exclamatory words from native languages, such as “Hai... I am killed!” (Dai 19), which expresses horror, grief, or regret, and is borrowed from Hindi language. Another example is the word “nyek” in “a sharp ‘nyek!’” (Dai 43), which is a Tagalog word from Filipino language that expresses sudden pleasant feelings. These untranslated words add to the authenticity of the story's setting and characters. Instead of relying solely on the vocabulary of Adi and Hindi languages, Dai also uses Persian and Urdu words in her writing. Below is a word from Urdu language:

He seemed to live in a timeless zone and from a great distance, setting in this village house, in his green galuk and khaki shorts, he followed his interests in the lives of men, animals and plants, in the origin of the universe, or quite simply thought about how to be a good chess player (Dai 31).

“galuk” and “khaki,” are the two Hindi and Urdu borrowed words, in the above text. However, she uses many words from native languages throughout the novel, which creates a sense of ambiguity.

In another instance, Dai uses a common Urdu word when telling the story of Rakut's father. This can make it difficult for English speakers who are not familiar with the language, but that is precisely the author's intention. She aims to add authenticity to the story by including native language words that are not commonly known by English speakers. The instance goes like: “Resentment had flared up against Rakut's father, who, as the local interpreter for the British Sahibs, had been instructed that at least three men from his village be sent to work on the road” (Dai 43). The word “Sahib” used in the sentence is originally not an English word, but is borrowed from Urdu language. This may cause confusion or difficulty for English speakers who are not familiar with the term.

*Pensam* is a collection of closely connected stories that are richly textured with words from native languages. Almost every story in the book contains such words, which Dai uses purposefully to add an indigenized flavour to her language. Another example is when she talks about a cultural festival of dance; she again takes help from native vocabulary as she says, “They had lit a big fire in anticipation of our stay and for the long night of stories, when myth and memory would be reborn in the song of ponung dancers” (51). The meaning of the expression is evident from the context, but its literal meaning is unclear because it is borrowed from the Adi language. In a different context, Dai employs the term “Damki,” (Adi word) which also has ambiguous literal connotations, “It happened long ago. The Lotang family of the Miga clan own a fabulous vessel called a damki” (62). When she narrates the tale of a Native Indian and a British officer, Dai substitutes the commonplace term “British” with the variant “Breetees” as she writes: “Aiee! Aie, where did they meet each other? Are they Breetees migluns” (64)?

In addition to deviating from Standard English, Mamang Dai also demonstrates a preference for adhering to proper English structures and acknowledges the linguistic superiority of the colonizers. However, the English language has been the subject of intense debate among postcolonial theoreticians, who argue that it was used as a tool to assert dominance of the colonizers over the colonized, as Braj Kachru puts it in these words: “The English language is a tool

of power, domination and elitist identity and of communication across continents” (291).

Therefore, Dai’s use of appropriate structures and expressions shows that she is linguistically ambivalent. For instance, when Dai narrates the story of Hoxo she uses very accurate structures of the English language:

Hoxo immediately sensed there were no other children in the house. He had no idea how old he was, no one said anything and no one ever asked him if he loves his father more or his mother, like he heard all other children being asked. When he joined school, the children there stared at him. No one greeted him and he remembered his own tentative smile full of hope and eagerness (17).

Furthermore, Mamang Dai also demonstrates her commitment to using accurate linguistic structures in the story of Hoxo. Here Dai again practices the structure of standard English:

The one thing no one could explain at the time, or at any time later, was the small

fish that was found in the dead man’s shirt pocket. It was slippery and mashed and the scales stuck to his skin even when they ripped open the shirt and tried to wipe away the blood. Maybe it was a fish he has caught in one of the small streams maybe it was something he was bringing back from the Hoxo. Or maybe it was spirit manifestation of something else. Who could tell about these things? (20).

English language has long been regarded as a tool for promoting dominance and superiority of the colonizers over the colonized. The colonial powers imposed binary structures<sup>2</sup> on all aspects of life including indigenous languages. To assert their dominance and hegemony, they established a standardized version of the language which was distinct from the languages spoken in the peripheries. As a result, postcolonial writers who navigate between the language of the Centre and the language of the peripheries occupy an in-between position. Linguistic control is a key feature of imperial oppression. (Ashcroft et al 7).

*Pensam* focuses on the everyday practices of the tribal people in Arunachal Pradesh, located in Northeast India. The book deals extensively with the issues of identity and the quest for cultural roots, while simultaneously aiming to bring the traditional culture of the community into the realm of modernity. In the first part of the novel, titled "A Diary of the World," the characters

Hoxo, Rakut, Nenem, and Pinyar celebrate the vanishing way of life of the community as they guard its ancestral roots. Hoxo, the boy who fell from the sky was brought home in a basket by a person whose wife greeted him with love:

She lifted him out of the basket. Even today Hoxo could not remember any happiness greater than the moment of that touch he has known more than half a century ago. Hoxo immediately sensed there were no other children in the house. He had no idea how old he was, no one said anything (Dai 8).

The novel can be viewed as a metaphorical journey that reflects Dai's personal quest for her cultural roots and heritage. Throughout the book, Dai repeatedly returns to her own cultural practices despite her history as a resident of a former British colony. The novel is dedicated to exploring the cultural practices of the Adi tribe, which is the very subject of the book, as Rosaline argues: “And in the course of narration, Dai walks into the corridors of time to find her origin to re-establish her roots” (32). She tells the story of Biribik the water serpent, which she announces is “fixed in their collective memory” (9). The idea of "home" in the novel is portrayed as a metaphorical representation of one's origin and identity. This is what Pinyar tells her son Kumar, “Come, we will go home,” (Dai 32). The text suggests that the protagonist's mother intends to take him back to his birthplace, with which he feels a strong connection. Similarly, the protagonist Kumar appears to yearn for his home. His madness and the tragic death of his children may be attributed, in part, to his displacement and separation from his mother, Pinyar, during his childhood, and his subsequent life in the distant town of Pigo. It is apparent that Kumar's episode is triggered by a sense of rootlessness, as he never experiences another fit after his mother returns to him during his acute mental disturbance and brings him back to his roots. This incident enables Kumar to regain his sense of identity, which he longs for before his fit ~ specifically, the desire to reunite with his mother in his native home.

The novel’s text features a varied narrative voice, but it is notable that the indigenous people hold the authority to depict their land using its unique characteristics. This is exemplified in the section of the novel titled "A Homecoming," where the narrator, originally from Duyang village, shifts to

urban areas. Over a period of time, she recognizes that she has become disconnected from her roots. She longs for her own land and declares: "I could not bear to give up the original image and I could not change myself" (Dai 81). Dai utilizes the metaphor of a "mother" to refer to an individual's place of origin. The narrator says that she returned to her mother, "who hadn't been able to hold me back" (Dai 81). In a similar vein, the death of the narrator's mother serves as a metaphor for transformation in her homeland, which she had always attempted to leave behind. Despite her efforts to distance herself from her roots, the gaze and language of her land remains deeply rooted; the words of her land are so potent that she "had shielded herself with words and books that she never understood nor read (Dai 82). Despite adopting the language and lifestyle of the colonizers for protection, the narrator remains unable to abandon her inherent identity. As a result, she embarks on a quest to rediscover her true self by delving into the traditional teachings of her ancestors. She triggers her memory to remember "stories of creation, of our village and our people" (87), which she had heard from her mother—her origin, but grows up to "expect happiness far away from her" (Dai 87). The narrative of "Rites of Love" marks the climax of the protagonist's search for roots, conveyed through a powerful symbolic representation. The earthquake that struck Nenem's homeland on August 15th, 1950 not only caused significant changes in the region's population but also instilled fear and anxiety in her life. A river always finds association with the genesis and continuity of a civilization, and "the river that Nenem had to love was thrown off its course as a mountain collapsed and blocked its path" (Dai 126). The earthquake serves as a powerful symbol, as it disrupts the harmony of the native community. The bustling marketplace, which once teemed with life as tribal foods and local goods were traded in, where Nenem would purchase oranges and meet her love, David, becomes a graveyard of dead fish in the aftermath of the disaster.

The narrator's quest for her roots is evident not only as she traverses time and recreates her past through the stories and histories of her land, but also as she analyses the changes that have overpowered the lives of her tribesmen. Before the road connected the Duyang village to the outside world, they lived a primitive life with

their own laws and customs, and a strong sense of community living where they helped each other rebuild houses, celebrated festivals and mourned together during funerals. However, with the construction of the road, the easy influx of ideas from the outside world began to challenge their way of life. The traditional practices of hunting and farming are no longer sufficient to sustain their livelihoods, and they become increasingly vulnerable to theft and burglary. This detachment from their roots brings about a sense of insecurity and a loss of the carefree life they once knew. Previously, their customs and faiths restricted them from going to hunt after consuming rice-spirit, which warded off any hazards due to hallucination: "The village had moved to its own quite rhythm for centuries with old certainties and beliefs, but the road was changing all that" (Dai 148). The tribe's traditional community and judicial system began to weaken over time. In the past, if a member had violated the taboo against killing a fellow human during a hunting expedition, they would be banished to the jungle without objection from the rest of the community. However, the onset of modernity, marked by the construction of roads and electric poles, brings about changes that erode the tribe's unique cultural identity and way of life, as, "for the first time in the village voices had been raised in dissent" (Dai 153). As a result of these changes, tensions begin to rise within the tribe. Young men such as Luda are filled with frustration and anger towards the new system, and some even express a desire for violent retaliation. However, *Pensam* depicts how the eruption of violence in the Siang Valley was averted, as Mamang Dai treads to the roots of her culture and finds: "It is not in our tradition to be violent" (157).

One noteworthy point is that the local community is well aware of the impact that the construction of roads has had on their way of life. They recognize that the introduction of modern infrastructure has led to a sense of displacement and vulnerability to external influences and they say, "We have sown grain together and we have reaped harvests, and we have survived. Now stop sowing poison" (Dai 154). The tribe was undergoing a period of rapid transformation, with the encroachment of foreign cultures threatening to disrupt the established social structure. Despite these changes, a nostalgia for

the unspoiled origins of their culture is still evident in the tribe. When Duan, the tribe's elected representative, is summoned by his people while working at the capital, he promptly returns to the tribe to address their concerns and declares that the reason behind his immediate response is: "This is my home. I was born here. These stones, this mountain, this dust, this earth, it is in my blood. All of you, all of us must work together to bring progress to our village, our beautiful village" (Dai 154). The search for one's roots is a fundamental human desire to reconnect with one's origins and reclaim one's sense of identity. In *Pensam*, this desire is brought to life as the narrative traverses through time to uncover the customs, beliefs, and festivals of the Adi tribe. The book also sheds light on how various changes throughout history have impacted the land, with Nenem serving as a symbol for those who have struggled to adapt to these changes. However, the examples of Sirsiri and Kasup demonstrate how individuals can successfully navigate and integrate into the changing world. Overall, *Pensam* is a poignant reminder of the importance of preserving cultural heritage while also embracing the inevitability of change, and "learn the secrets of modern life" (Dai 170). Meng X is a group that embodies the spirit of nostalgia, as they use their music to reconnect with the past. Their songs serve as a constant search for the remnants of old times, providing a window into the cultural heritage that has been left behind. In an era where change is a constant force, the group's efforts to recollect the past serve as a powerful reminder of the importance of preserving cultural traditions; in the words of Rakut, "Change is a wonderful thing! Why should we be afraid of change? It is a simple matter of rearrangement, a moment of great possibilities! Why should we be so afraid?" (Dai 172). In this context, the narrator also undergoes a transformation, adapting her technique to better capture the essence of her land's legends. As the situation demands, she abandons the notion of presenting her clan's image to the world through a "diary of the world," instead opting for a more nuanced and introspective approach to storytelling. The quest for roots is very much evident as she realizes that the "clan root is oratory" (Dai 158). The traditional rhapsodists had long disappeared, and with the advent of modernity, the narrator of the

novel realizes the importance of using film to capture and preserve the images of her native land. She adapts to this new technology as a means of regenerating the visual aspects of her culture, recognizing that this approach will allow her to capture and preserve the essence of her people for future generations.

Memory plays a vital role in folk traditions. During the transition phase, the narrator realizes and consoles saying, "If only they remember, someday, they would bridge the gap" (Dai 163). To prevent the loss of her people's native originality, the narrator is compelled to continue her quest to uncover and record her cultural heritage through film. By capturing the essence of her past, she aims to provide a bridge between the younger generations and their origins, helping to close the gap between the borrowed present and the traditions of the past. Mamang Dai's work serves as a poignant documentation of the life and culture of the Adi tribe, providing a direct narration of the people of the land through the "diary of the world" in the first half and through film in the second half. While the method of documentation may differ, the ultimate goal of preserving the cultural heritage of the Adi tribe remains the same. The desire to shed light on the Adi world and reclaim their identity is a shared goal between Mona, who represents the outside world, and the narrator, a native of the land. *Pensam* serves as a powerful expression of the Adi tribal culture, which has been constantly influenced by foreign cultures throughout history. Through this work, the constant desire to retain one's identity and quest for one's roots is portrayed, providing a means of preventing the clan from fading into obscurity, as the old people of the clan hope and profess "flowers growing on barren rocks" (Dai 162), and desire to grow old "not walking in an unknown land" (Dai 161).

#### **Dai's Cultural and Religious Ambivalence**

The stereotypical binaries such as centre/margin and black/white are, of course, linguistically and discursively constructed by the colonizer. Black peoples and their cultures, according to the colonizer, are emotional rather than intellectuals; and hence, they lack critical and speculative insights (Ashcroft et al 20). These were, in fact, colonial stereotypes for the subjugation and exploitation of the weaker nations. Further, this colonial domination was purely based on culture

and language to manipulate other nations because the aforementioned two elements are very powerful in terms of psychic control. The very aim of colonial discourse is to disrupt the cultures of the conquered peoples in a particular manner (Leitch et al 1587). With respect to racial discrimination, the colonial discourses are constructed in such a way to portray the black peoples as inferior and even non-humans, as Fanon writes: "It has been said that the Negro is the link between monkey and man-meaning, of course, white man" (18). Postcolonialism and race issues are inseparable because the very essence of colonialism is structured on mythical binaries, for instance, self/other, white/black, civilized/uncivilized, rational/emotional, and so forth. Therefore, racialized discourses are the very bedrocks of colonial ideologies. The colonized suffered and displaced in every sphere whether cultural, religious, racial, linguistic, historical and communal (Memmi 135).

Like every community, India too, suffered a lot in terms of cultural, religious, political, identity and racial crises during colonial rule. So, Indian authors deal with such issues on priority basis in their writings. In their texts, there is always a clash between white and brown race. Dai, in *Pensam*, deals exclusively with the problem of white and brown race which, of course, is the racial dichotomization of the colonizer and the colonized. In the novel, Dai, at times, seems prone to white race as well as to brown race.<sup>3</sup>

Northeast India generally and Arunachal Pradesh particularly is the land of various tribes. There inhabit twenty-six major tribes and one hundred and ten sub-clans; however, famous among them is the Adi tribe, which is also the main focus of the novel. Almost each tribe has its own language, history and cultural practices; therefore, it is a land of diverse and rich cultural heritage. About the genesis and history of these tribes, Dai states: The origin of the tribes of Arunachal is still shrouded in mystery. No conclusive data about their early history and progress of migration has been ascertained. It is, however, believed that they came from the triangle of Burma, where numerous Mongoloid tribal groups of similar culture lived in a widely dispersed area between the Salween, Mekong and Yangtze rivers (18).

In *Pensam*, the clash between white and brown is evident in almost every story as the novel is a collection or series of closely connected stories.

Here is an utterance in which Dai praises the white race in these words:

The migluns<sup>4</sup> were fighting the Japans, and fires raged on earth and in the sky. It was said that there were different types of migluns, and that some of them had wings. Those from a big county called America shouted a lot and they were more frightening than the original migluns who were the Bee-ree-tiss<sup>5</sup>. But when it came to building the great road for their armies to march against the enemy, they were one (43).

In the novel, the story "daughters of the village" is recurrently punctuated with such utterances in which Dai praises the white race. In others sections of the novel the recurrence is the same, but in this one Dai's negotiation of race is very much evident. The story "daughters of the village" is actually based on encounters of a local girl, Nenem, and a British officer, David. Rakut, a local boy, says that his father is a government servant with the British officer and he treated him and all the people around very well. Here Dai projects how civilized and ethically strong this British officer is. Dai praises him like:

Rakut remembered that his father, happily employed with the miglun at the time, riding the bicycle in the village and delivering government mail, used to say that he had seen Nenem flitting in and out of sahib's office many time, but that he had never accosted her (86).

In another instance, the British officer, David, picks a local girl, Nenem, and drops her at her desired destination. Here Dai again praises the courtesy and decency of the British officer, as she remarks: "He was driving beside her. "He stopped and motioned for her to get in. When he saw her hesitate, he made a sign that he would only drive her up to the bridge. When they reached the bridge, David got out and opened the door for her" (92). Here Dai clearly exalts the British officer in terms of his treatment of the local people and particularly women; Dai acknowledges here the British officer's highly cultured and sophisticated demeanor. In this story, Dai actually wants to bring together the two races (white and brown) via these two characters, Nenem and David, and appreciates greatly the English race time and again in moral, ethical, social and cultural spheres. Throughout the story Neenem and David meet casually, as Dai writes: "Many people saw them together like this" (92). Dai praises many a good qualities of the miglun

or British officer, however, she doesn't rely only on the apparent ones, but also praises the intelligence and administrative skills of the British officer; she writes as follows: "From the sketchy accounts available of that time, captain David was an intelligent officer who had been recruited from the Bengal provinces to serve in the hill district and assist the new political officer in his duties" (92). And yet again she dwells on the same point: "The big sahib was a kind, elderly man with years of experience in dealing with the many tribes of the country" (97). On another occasion, when a local elder visits the office of the British officer, Dai portrays the British officer as hospitable and noble: "He spoke the local tongue and immediately called out to Sogong. 'Come, come in! Hey, Sogong, how are you let's have some tea, shall we?'" (97).

Dai tries to show to the entire community that the migluns are good people and of decent and noble origin. In *Pensam*, she time and again presents David and other British officers as better than the native Indians. She puts it in these words: "Everyone knew him as David Sahib. He was about twenty-eight years old, an open and friendly man who spoke fluent Hindustani and seemed to have a knack for picking up languages because he was already quite conversant with many of the hill languages" (93). Furthermore, in the story "daughters of the village", Dai says that it is actually the British officer, David, who gives worldview and perspectives on various matters to the local girl, Nenem. Dai states: "Through him she saw the world beyond" (93). In the same context, Dai again comments: "David brought Nenem here once so that she could see the view of the river that he saw all the time" (94). Here the river, as in every literary piece, symbolizes consciousness, grace, and fluidity in thoughts and flexibility in worldview. When a senior British officer doubts a junior officer of some romantic affair with a local girl, he cautions and advises the junior officer about the pitfalls. Dai puts the matter in these words:

Except the big sahib, who broached the subject with his junior one day. 'Captain David,' he said in his loud, clear voice. 'There is something going around, ahmm...about you, that you have taken up with a tribal woman.' When David didn't answer, he said, 'I am a man of peace. The people here are good people (97).

David and Nenem metaphorically symbolize the clash between the two races (White and Brown). For Dai, it appears hard to eulogize the one at the cost of other and hence is ambivalent towards the Britishers. For her it is difficult to overlook the uniqueness of age-long cultural, social, religious and other ritualistic practices of the indigenous tribes vis-a-vis a more civilized race. She is herself an Adi, Dai is conscious about her race and roots; as such she dwells at length on the origin of these tribes and races. About the origin of her race she writes:

The origin of the tribes of Arunachal is still shrouded in mystery. No conclusive data about their early history and progress of migration has been ascertained. It is, however, believed that they came from the triangle of Burma, where numerous Mongoloid tribal groups of similar culture lived in a widely dispersed area between the Salween, Mekong and Yangtze rivers (*Hidden Land* 18).

In the story of "daughters of the village" Dai flights back to her own race. Here is an utterance which shows her ambivalent attitude when she talks about Nenem's inclinations towards a British officer: "It was an enigma how two strangers could be so unaccountably drawn to one another in a little town in the hills from where even the rest of the country was remote and unknown" (93). Nenem sells fruits in the village market mostly to the British officers which Dai resents as an act of dishonour, showing how Dai reserves a dignified space for the local girl: "She had no need to sell oranges or even visit the marketplace; she was the daughter of a revered village elder, she should go back" (92).

From the very beginning of the story, Dai declares that Nenem's beauty is even fascinating for the white men, when she describes the beautiful looks of Nenem: "She was radiant dark-eyed and her long hair was pulled back in a simple knot. It was a picture of the legendary beauty Nenem, mother of Losi, better remembered as the woman who fell in love with a British officer" (86). In the same story, when Mona asks Losi about a photo of her family, Dai traces the family tree through a photo: "Do you have any old family photograph? Mona asked Losi. Any pictures of your father-in-law or your own parents?" (86). Dai gives grace, dignity and a noble origin in every aspect of her race. For instance, like she projects even sanctity when she

says that an elder of a clan is descended from the sky: “And so it was. The death of Lutor, famous chief of Ida clan, father of the boy who fell from the sky, was mourned far and wide” (20). Besides, Dai says that tribal men and even women are very modern and not like primitive people of the world. She shows sophistication, at length, in all the characters including female ones as she says: “She must have been very brave, Nenem, to accept the miglun’s attention and give him love in return in the face of so much gossip and astonishment” (86). In addition to the noble origin, Dai also spotlights the hidden qualities of the native race and proves them very humane and kind people. Furthermore, as ethics is the vital element of any culture or a civilized society, Dai establishes that native people are very strong, as she says: “Those who had known her said Nenem was of quiet demeanour, but with an impulsive streak that was unpredictable. Like the river, they said” (86). In the encounters of David and Nenem, Dai portrays the natives as superior to the English. When she compares the intellectual capacities of an English officer and a local girl, she prioritizes the native girl over the British officer: “With her very rudimentary knowledge of letters and books David might have been totally alien to Nenem, but deep within her she felt she understood his life” (93). As the concept of ‘White Man’s Burden’ stresses the white skin of the English people and prioritizes them over the non-white, Dai argues that other people are as beautiful as the English: “In her father’s house Nenem looked into the small mirror tacked to the wooden post. Her face was clear. The eyes looked back at her, wide and lustrous” (96). Dai present this dichotomy of the two races (English and native) through the characters of David and Nenem. In romantic advances, when David touches Nenem, Dai shows that the native girl is beautiful than the English women: “Oh sweetness! Oh wild, wild breathing! He raised himself and looked down at the whiteness of her skin” (96). In Nenem’s relationship with David, Dai eulogizes the beauty of the local girl and places her beyond any comparison. The strength of Nenem’s character is boldly highlighted when she gets news of David’s journey to England, she says in a calm demeanour: “yes, I know, she said. He will be leaving soon. Don’t worry, I won’t disappear! How can I go with him” (98). Like a true daughter of her race, she stays faithful to her

values. Here Dai demonstrates that the advances of relationship from a British officer to a native girl are even against the values and dignity of the native people. In addition, here Dai is reluctant to the mixing of both the races.

India, indisputably, is the land of diverse ethnic and religious groups and has a rich cultural and religious history. Many religious ideologies are there such as Hinduism, Buddhism, Jainism, Christianity, Zoroastrianism, Sikhism and Islam. Every religion has its own history in the region. Religion, in simple terms, can be defined as the set of attitudes, abstract beliefs and practices pertaining to supernatural powers, whether that be forces, gods, spirits, ghosts or demons (Dutta 12). According to some sources, Saint Thomas, one of Jesus Christ’s disciples, visited India in the first century and established churches here (Mittal 211). Later on Portuguese explorer, Vasco da Gama, also visited India, and thus established a route to India from Europe for trade and commerce. Thenceforth, besides trades and commerce, the Portuguese kings were interested in the spread of Christian faith in India (Mittal 212). In Arunachal Pradesh, Northeast India, the tribal community practices a mixture of different faiths including animism<sup>6</sup>. For this community, nature is the object of worship: “In Arunachal nature in its varied manifestation is the object of inspiration, reverence, often of awe and fear, worship and supplication” (Dutta 13).

However, as religious and cultural practices undergo changes in the course of time, India, too, has greatly been influenced by Christianity during the colonial epochs. Religion occupies a legitimate portion of the ideological-aesthetical imaginary of the South Asian fictional psyche (Karmakar 4). During colonialism, Christianization was one of the essential objectives of the colonization process because same faiths and belief systems can bring two very heterogeneous communities together. Albert Memmi puts it in these words: “The same goes for the indisputable hold of deep-rooted religion. Complacently, missionaries depict this formality as an essential feature of non-Christian religions” (144). The process of Christianization of native Indians has eloquently been examined by the Post-colonial theorist, Homi K. Bhabha, in the *The Location of Culture*. About Christianization of the native Indians, Bhabha states: “A great stir was excited by the gradual increasing information

hereby obtained, and all united to acknowledge the superiority of the doctrines of this Holy Book to everything which they had hitherto heard or known” (147). The Christian missionaries, during the colonial era, translated Bible into Hindi language for native Indians and distributed numerous copies in Delhi and stated that these are the words of God and you have to obey. About which Bhabha further elucidates:

“This WORD is of God, and not of men; and when HE makes your hearts to understand, then you will PROPERLY comprehend it” (148). The very claim of the colonizer was the superiority of Christianity over the indigenous religions and to make the followers of other faiths as inferior. Colonial discourse, apart from its numerous other features, its dependence on the concept of ‘fixity’ is of greater importance in the theoretical construction of Otherness (Bhabha 94). Dai, being a victim of different beliefs systems, sticks to her own Indian belief systems;

however, sometimes inclined towards the religion of the colonizer— Christianity. In *Pensam*, the tribal people practice all major religions of India including the Adi tribes. However, the followers of animistic faith are greater in number. In *Pensam*, the Adi tribe (which is the main focus of the novel) practices animistic faith

that is woven around forest and ecology, in consonance with the natural world and with their unique sense of history. It is a place where indigenous people say: “When you look at the land you forget your aches and pain” (Dai 11). According to the Adi tribes, the human world and the natural world are not two different entities; rather they are complementary to each other. The work gives us a glimpse into the minds of the tribal people who reject the anthropocentric view of universe. Dai weaves a thread of religious harmony and integrity by portraying the Adi tribe’s religious way of life. *Pensam* is an entangled web of history, culture, religion and myths. Dai toys with the idea of the Adi community being tangled in between reality and myth.

She knits four interconnected elements of tribal lore— “a diary of the world”, “song of the rhapsodist”, “daughters of the village” and “a matter of time”— which set the reader’s rationale of the novel. There are memorable characters in the novel whose time-honored belief systems and rituals revolve around their lives. The prologue of

the novel begins with a myth about a lady who battled against a supreme power to wave a tapestry. The first section seems illusory, fanciful, unfettered and open-ended with regard to the narratives rendered in the novel. The character Hoxo mysteriously falls from the sky, and at the moment when he opens his eyes, he sees green walls of trees, bamboo and a green waterfall that sprays his cheeks. He is found by a villager named Lutor, who is the famous chief of the Ida clan. None of the villagers asks questions about the child, as their minds are filled with superstitious beliefs. Later Lutor is killed in a hunting incident after he unfortunately sees Biribik, a water serpent whose horned head resembles a malignant spirit; this causes Lutor’s death.

Other strings of stories soon unfold; here we find stories within stories connected to Adi tribal myths, supernatural powers, spirits and deities. This part of the novel tells of the mysterious death of the characters inside the thick and dense woodlands of the hills. The stories are arduous to interpret with conventional logic, but the tribal people have belief in the tales. As Pinyar, the widow, says: “Faith is everything” (Dai 35). Pinyar was fatigued with her life, having been betrayed by her husband, lost her son, and had her home burned down. As we can read: “It seems my destiny is cursed” (Dai 28). Religious rituals and myths are fixed in the unconscious of these tribes as Dai states: “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” (9). The transmission of myths is highly reflective of the capacity of memory which is fixed in the minds of the Adi people. Lutor, the teller of the myth, creates a link to the next generation of people and their tribal society; the chain of preserving the myths and legends of the past will thus continue in the future through the act of ‘remembering’ and ‘recalling’. Religious memory thus preserves the past in symbolic forms, as delineated in oral myths. Dai also gives us the insight that the Adi people’s minds were sharp and wise, no matter how old they physically appeared: “She was very old now but her mind was sharp and alert. She was quiet when I told her about Mona’s interest in the stories of the village” (Dai 13).

The readers witness how Adi society’s collective memory is enacted in this way: “They had lit a big

fire in anticipation of our stay and for the long night of stories, when myth and memory would be reborn in the song of ponung dancers” (Dai 49). The story of the supernatural beings, known as ‘miti-mili’, reflects the Adi tribe’s mystical beliefs. For Pinyar, the widow, the death of hunters in accidents is no surprise to her, as it is the irresponsible behavior of the people which causes such deaths. She narrates a story involving the preparation of rice beer with special yeast:

Once upon a time, there lived a race of supernatural beings called the miti-mili.

These small, quiet people were the first to make the mysterious si-ye that is the yeast used to ferment rice into beer. Before the miti-mili race disappeared, deranged by strange visions, they give this sacred powder to mankind, and a strong belief grew that si-ye had special powers and that it was something to be handled with respect (Dai 28).

Pinyar believes that the myth is authentic, and when her husband is killed by a man in a hunting accident, she holds no resentment against the culprit, as she attributes his act to the spirit of si-ye, stating: “There is a bad spirit lurking in the spirit that makes men go mad” (Dai 29). Pinyar’s superstitious beliefs about the miti-mili race are highlighted, as her memory causes her to believe the mythical stories. She also shares the story with other visitors, seeking to make them believe. Henceforth, memory plays a crucial role not only in passing on such myths from generation to generation, but also in geographical knowledge of the community’s land, which creates their unique religious practices. Dai stresses the role of myths for the Adi tribe: it is a treasure-house for their fractured religious identity and a resource for its revival, as it is not only an individual’s memory, but also the memory of their land, of their culture, of their beliefs, of their ancestors. It is a unique inherited quality of their minds. Everything in the novel is deeply rooted in religious beliefs; for instance, color too has a religious connotation for the Adi tribe: “The colour green always soothed him. It was the colour of escape and solitude” (Dai 17). In the novel, Dai brings these tribal people very close to nature even these people have communion with nature; they are talking to and listening to nature and natural objects. As Dai says:

Every day they explored the hills further and further away from the village, and every day, for

many years, they climbed to the flat top of their favourite hill and flung themselves down on the open ground just talking and speaking their thoughts to the trees, the cane bushes and the sharp summer light (18).

Dai connects every natural object to her belief system. For instance, she seeks supernatural forces and agencies in natural objects and even in uncertain things:

The one thing no one could explain at the time, or at any time later, was the small fish that was found in the dead man’s shirt pocket. It was slippery and mashed and scales stuck to his skin even when they ripped open the shirt and tried to wipe away the blood. Maybe it was a fish he had caught in one of the small streams. Maybe it was something he was bringing back for Hoxo. Or maybe it was the spirit manifestation of something else. Who could tell about these things?” (Dai 20).

Tribal people always happen to be religious and so is the case in the novel. They seek each and everything in religious beliefs; beliefs govern their lives in every aspect. They attribute every happening to spirits and deities in the land: “The old people of our village had sat around speculating on clan titles and origins, or births, loves, and spirits and ghosts. The right or wrong kind of marriage, the right or wrong kind of life, could always be traced to something in the blood, they said” (Dai 36). On another occasion Dai writes: “From nothing 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” (56).

Though Dai’s mind is deeply rooted in her own beliefs, yet she seems inclined towards modernity and stiltedly wants to escape from the superstitions. In the beginning of the novel she says that the tribal people are caught in an in-between position; which implicitly refers to ambivalence. Dai writes:

In our language, the language of the Adis, the word ‘Pensam’ means ‘in-between’. It suggests the middle, or the 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 (7).

The second section of the novel begins with the arrival of migluns (white men) in the Adi lands; the new arrival began to control the area by constructing roads, taking administrative power and spreading Christianity, marking the destructive process in the name of civilization in a previously tribal territory. The couple, Mona and Jules, visit the village from distant lands to learn about the culture and religious practices of the tribal people. Both of them participate in cultural practices and ceremonies, and they listen enthusiastically to the folk songs sung by the local villagers. They leave the village with bountiful memories, stories and experiences that they have gained from the Adi community, making their journey worthwhile.

The fourth section of the novel spotlights the ongoing changes in community, which cause a sense of terror among the masses. Innocence is lost, beauty is diminishing, and the aura is foul-smelling as the trumpets of modernity blow. The resentment towards the changing times is highlighted through the characters. As Larik says: "This terrible road is all they have for us in 50 years! And what does it bring us? Outsiders. Thieves. Diseases" (Dai 156).

They understood that it was a nebulous zone that divided the worlds of spirits and men—in fact, in one time men and spirits had been brothers. They knew that what was real could will be an illusion, and that reality might only be the context that people gave to a moment. But they were shaken (36).

After the colonial era, the tribal people are now not that much sure about their beliefs, as Pinyar says:

After she brought him back, Pinyar says, "My boy is being hunted by an evil spirit because we failed to observe certain rites in the past. It was a mistake on the part of our parents and our parents' parents. It was my mistake too. But now I know what we have to do. All the great priests will come to exercise the bad spirit. I have called them (Dai 38).

Similarly, another character, Kumar, also goes through such turmoil:

In his wife's house, meanwhile, Kumar walked up and down, up and down. He jerked his knees, grimaced and laughed to himself. His heart was no longer where it used to be. Once there was a

dwelling place. A place for safe return. Now it was twisted beyond recognition. Only one picture hung before his eyes like a drawing in blood. His ears hummed with the distant howling of children (Dai 38).

Now every character confesses that things are not genuine and real; they have changed a great deal: Everyone is so busy, hah! Hah! My wife looks at me with hate now. Something has happened! She was so shy once, hiding behind that radiant hair. Something has happened. My son is afraid of me, as if I would hurt him. No one knows how this hurts me. My heart is gone away to that place where they beat me and beat me (38).

After Dai's inclination towards modernity, every character is portrayed with modern thought-pattern; they are now no more like their ancestors: "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" (Dai 45). Comparably, in another context, Dai states further:

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 (45).

Dai, every now and then, demonstrates that there is no traditional flavor in the religions and thought-pattern after the colonial rule, as she says: "The village where the migluns had gone. This, of course, was a figure of speech. The early decades of the 20<sup>th</sup> century were times of great upheaval, when even our remote hills were opened up to the world" (50). This ambivalence is now prevalent with every character and they now confess to the same fact:

"We will travel again to your beautiful land. Let us leave in peace now. Do not pine for us. Do not call us back. We will travel this way again bearing more gifts next time" (Dai 59).

### Concluding discussions and recommendations

The ambivalent attitude of Dai's characters is not only confined to the traumatic experiences, problems of culture, religion, race, language and politics of the Northeast Indian population, but also spotlights, at a broader collective level, the same in the entire colonized territory of the Third

World as it is a common dilemma of all the colonized peoples. Without any doubt, literature mirrors human societies, but it also creates real heterotopic spaces, as Foucault says, “fiction functions in truth” (193). Therefore, Dai’s exposition of the psyche of the colonized, through the medium of fiction, is very much down-to-earth.

Ambivalence exists in various forms almost in every colonized nation including India and Pakistan. However, in our context, owing to lack of critical and anti-colonial responses, and with the advent of modernity, the people of this region face this dilemma in every walk of life; from thought-patterns, intellectual and critical debates to dress and food or whatsoever. Dai, in *The Legends of Pensam*, generously portrays this ambivalent attitude of the Third World nations. The analysis of the novel can be related to our own society where people (un)consciously inclined towards the practices of the white man and yet at the same time stick to their own beliefs, culture, ways of life, history and values. It can also be deduced from the study that even after the end of the British Empire, our society is not safe from the influences of white man: it could be in various ways, for instance, Neocolonialism. The present research can be helpful in many ways for the eradication of the ambivalent behaviour of our society in many respects: giving value to our own indigenous culture, religions, thoughts, literature, languages, education and political systems. Furthermore, from the examination of the novel, it can also be inferred that the present work, to a certain extent, exhibits psychological dilemma and traumatic experiences of our society and paves numerous ways for accumulative decolonization and anti-colonialism.

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