

Supernatural As Natural In Tribal Imagination: A Reading Of Mamang Dai's The Legends Of Pensam

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This paper examines the worldview of the Adi tribe of Arunachal Pradesh, which sees the supernatural as natural, portrayed in Mamang Dai's *The Legends of Pensam*. Nature is a dominant force in the novel, with rivers, forests, and mountains shaping human lives and destinies. Equally dominant is the supernatural, deeply embedded in Adi folklore, manifesting through spirits, prophetic dreams, and shamans who bridge the physical and spiritual realms. The novel illustrates the Adi people's belief that the unseen coexists with the natural world. Hoxo is introduced as a mystical figure who is believed to have fallen from the sky, and his wife Losi is believed to have been born to a river-woman. The existence of Biribik, the water serpent is not debated but accepted as truth. The search for shamans and the performance of rare rituals reflect the enduring influence of traditional healing practices, where supernatural forces are seen as real and powerful. In their imagination, the boundary between the human and spirit worlds is blurred.

Keywords: supernatural, natural, magical realism.

Introduction

Supernatural and natural elements in literature refer to the contrasting forces of the mystical and the real within a narrative. Merriam-Webster dictionary defines supernatural as relating to an order of existence beyond the visible observable universe especially of or relating to God or a god, demigod, spirit, or devil, departing from what is usual or normal especially so as to appear to transcend the laws of nature attributed to an invisible agent. In literature supernatural has been used "to tell of the beliefs of a society in the paranormal dimensions and how it shaped the life and thoughts of the society as a whole" (Jamir 361). Supernatural elements include magical powers, divine interventions, and mythological beings that go beyond the laws of nature, often shaping the story's events and characters' destinies. Natural elements, on the other hand, are grounded in reality, encompassing the physical world, human experiences, and scientific principles that govern life. Michael Winkelman, and John R Baker, in their book

Supernatural as Natural: A Biocultural Approach to Religion, explicate how the supernatural and natural are entwined in tribal imagination:

To many Westerners, the “natural” is regarded as the domain of science, while the “supernatural” is the domain of religion. Consequently, many people think that these two domains are mutually exclusive and perhaps even contradictory. But in many other societies, [particularly in tribal societies], the most important supernatural forces are natural, and the wind, the rain, different species of plants and animals, and even features of the landscape are conceptualized in religious terms and addressed through rituals. (“Preface” 2)

In Northeast India, specifically, the hill tribes view the supernatural as natural, and their literary works blend these elements, using the supernatural to explore deeper themes like fate, belief, and the unknown while maintaining a connection to natural human experiences. Mamang Dai in her *Legends of Pensam* highlights this factor.

Mamang Dai (b 1957) is a prominent Indian writer, journalist, and former civil servant of Arunachal Pradesh. She belongs to the Adi tribe and has played a significant role in documenting and preserving the oral traditions, folklore, and cultural heritage of Arunachal Pradesh through her literary works. As a journalist, she worked with *The Hindustan Times* and *The Telegraph*, covering issues related to the Northeast. Dai’s literary works include novels, poetry, and children’s books, often centred on themes of history, mythology, identity, and the deep connection between nature and tribal life. Some of her well-known books include *The Legends of Pensam*, *The Black Hill*, *Stupid Cupid*, and *Escaping the Land*. She has also written poetry collections such as *River Poems* and *Midsummer Survival Lyrics*. In recognition of her contributions to literature and culture, Mamang Dai received the Padma Shri in 2011. She was also honoured with the Sahitya Akademi Award in 2017 for her English novel *The Black Hill*. Through her works, she continues to be a vital voice in Indian literature, bringing the narratives of the Northeast to a wider audience.

The Legends of Pensam is a novel set in Arunachal Pradesh, weaving together the lives, myths, and traditions of the Adi tribe. ‘Pensam’, meaning ‘in-between’, symbolizes the novel’s exploration of the space between past and present, tradition and change, reality and myth. Through interconnected stories, the novel follows characters like Hoxo, a mysterious boy who survives a fatal fall; Pinyar, a woman with a tragic past; and other villagers whose lives are shaped by fate, love, loss, and the supernatural. Blending history, folklore, and personal narratives, the novel highlights the Adi people’s deep bond with nature and their belief in the unseen forces that shape their world. In *The Legends of Pensam*, Mamang Dai seamlessly blends supernatural elements such as prophetic dreams, mystical survival, and the spiritual essence of nature with the tangible aspects of tribal life, including cultural rituals, deep bonds with the environment, and the challenges of modern influence, creating a narrative where myth and reality are intricately intertwined.

In the beginning of *The Legends of Pensam*, Hoxo is introduced as a mystical figure who is believed to have fallen from the sky, and his wife Losi is believed to have been born to a river-woman.. Their story is deeply rooted in the oral traditions and beliefs of the Adi people. The novel, which blends history, folklore, and magical realism, presents Hoxo as a character whose existence reflects the blurred lines between myth and reality in the tribal worldview. His presence signifies the connection between the spiritual and earthly realms, reinforcing the Adi people's belief in the supernatural.

When Hoxo's father tells a story about the water serpent, the narrator comments: "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). This embodies magical realism by presenting the supernatural as an unquestioned part of reality. The existence of Biribik is not debated but accepted as truth, highlighting the Adi people's deep connection to folklore. The idea that the event remains vivid in collective memory, despite the loss of its original witness, emphasizes the timeless and mystical nature of oral tradition.

In the village, a man named Togum has a son, Kepi, who is affected by a disease that remains uncured. "...many rituals were performed. Togum travelled far and wide in search of famous shamans... The child did not move ... They carried him everywhere. Then someone said they should think about performing a special ceremony rarely performed these days, in case it was a spirit of snake that had coiled around the body of their son" (21). This illustrates how the community perceives illness not just as a physical condition but as a spiritual disturbance. The belief that a snake spirit might be responsible for the child's condition highlights the integration of the supernatural into daily life. The search for shamans and the performance of rare rituals reflects the enduring influence of traditional healing practices, where supernatural forces are seen as real and powerful. "All night they had chanted and negotiated with the spirits, calling them to restore the sick child, but the spirits had moved away to a place beyond recall. 'They are the most dangerous ones, the ones who go away and never return'" (23-24). This reflects the community's deep belief in spiritual forces influencing health and fate. The serpent ritual is seen as necessary for healing, but there is also an acceptance that time and unseen forces play a role. The idea that the spirits have moved beyond recall suggests a moment of helplessness, where even dedicated rituals and chants cannot guarantee a cure. The spirits that leave and never return are considered the most dangerous, emphasizing the uncertainty and fear surrounding illness and the limits of human intervention in the face of the unknown.

Pinyar, a widow in the village, speaks about the supernatural beings in the village: "Once upon a time, there lived a race of supernatural beings called Miti-mili. The small, quiet people were 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 gave this sacred power to mankind and a strong belief grew that si-ye had special powers and that it was something to be handled with respect" (28). The community's belief that si-ye has special powers stems from its mythical origins. Since it was given by beings who later vanished under

mysterious circumstances, handling it with respect becomes not just a tradition but a way to honour its sacred roots. The belief that misfortune and madness are caused by supernatural forces rather than human actions is evident. As a researcher has pointed out, “Primitive cultures . . . believe that supernatural forces are fundamental to mental health and illness causation” (Hansda 90). Pinyar does not blame the man who made her a widow but instead attributes the tragedy to a bad spirit within si-ye. The ritual of sprinkling si-ye on the eyelids of those who die unnaturally reflects the community’s effort to prevent restless spirits from returning, emphasizing their deep connection to spiritual forces and the unseen world.

When Pinyar’s son Kamur experiences a great tragedy, instead of attributing it to fate or human actions, Pinyar believes that bad spirits are responsible for the misfortune. This reflects the community’s deep-rooted belief that unseen forces influence human lives, causing suffering and misfortune. “It was a nebulous zone that divided the world of spirits and men. In fact, at one time, men and spirits had been brothers. They knew that what was real could well be an illusion, and that reality might only be the context that people gave me yet to a moment. But they were shaken” (31). In their imagination, the boundary between the human and spirit worlds is blurred. Once considered brothers, men and spirits shared a connection where reality and illusion were interchangeable. The idea that reality depends on perception suggests that truth is not fixed but shaped by belief. Despite this understanding, the people are still unsettled, highlighting the lingering fear and uncertainty in their relationship with the supernatural. At that crucial moment, Pinyar makes a statement: “My boy is being haunted 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 exorcise the bad spirit. I have called them” (Legends 33). This statement aligns with the following observation: “A belief in the supernatural is present in nearly all societies. Such beliefs range from monotheistic religions that feature a moralizing high God to less centralized religious beliefs that involve ancestral spirits and related magical beliefs” (Rossignol).

Every winter, men from nearby villages embark on a dangerous journey to snow-mountain to collect the deadly aconitum plant, used for making poison arrows. This annual ritual has existed for generations, though its origins remain unknown. The trek is perilous, with travellers experiencing extreme conditions, isolation, and hallucinations in the harsh, silent wasteland. Many return with eerie stories of survival, often amazed at their own escape from the mountain’s deadly grip. To ensure their safe passage, they seek to appease the jealous spirits surrounding them. “The spirits of our ancestors who dwelt in these high and sacred 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” (42). A world once protected by ancestral spirits collapsed when the sacred trees fell. Homeless and abandoned, the spirits vanished, leaving behind a landscape stripped of tradition and shelter. With their departure, everything has changed, the comforting embrace of the past is gone, and the people stand exposed, their faces scorched by the unforgiving wind

and sun. The balance between the natural and supernatural has been shattered, marking the end of an era where spirits and mortals coexisted in harmony.

The belief in ancestral connections strengthens their social structure, making kinship not just a tradition but a crucial force in facing adversity. In the middle of the novel, a woman character Dumi suffers from a long illness and eventually passes away. Following her death, numerous rituals are conducted in her honour: “Dumi died that March. We kept the fires burning all night in the ritual wake for the dead, but there was no warmth” (78). Dumi’s death is honoured with a ritual wake, where fires burn all night. Yet, the lack of warmth symbolizes the community’s belief that true warmth comes from life and spirit, not just flames. Their belief in ghosts and spirits is deeply ingrained in their everyday life.

The presence of ghosts and spirits is deeply felt along the riverbanks and fading forests, where they are believed to watch jealously and follow people closely. A young woman, resting by the river, unknowingly stays until sunset, a time believed to be dangerous. In their culture, it is a serious mistake for a woman to linger near water after dusk, as the night is filled with restless dreams and wandering spirits. This belief reflects their close connection to nature and the supernatural, where the unseen world influences daily life. In one part of the novel, David, a Britisher, arrives at the market where Nenem and her friends are selling oranges. Curious about the local goods, he moves close to Nenem and, without asking, takes something from her bag. It is a piece of ginger, a simple yet significant act that hints at his interest in their way of life and possibly in Nenem herself. Seeing the incident, her friend Neyang exclaims in surprise: “Ginger was for protection. The wild ginger was a potent medicine against evil spirits. A piece of it was tied around the necks of young children to ward off illness and always carried out of sheer habit when a person was travelling” (94). Ginger is believed to have protective powers, especially against evil spirits. The wild variety is considered a potent medicine, used to prevent illness by tying it around children's necks. Travellers carry it as a habitual safeguard, reflecting the deep-rooted belief in its spiritual and medicinal strength.

Thought to have come from a sacred realm, Nenem is linked to the mythical land among the stars, a celestial place where a beautiful bride once dwelled. This heavenly figure is said to have descended to earth, blessing humanity with wisdom and grace. Her presence symbolizes a connection between the divine and the mortal world, reinforcing the belief that celestial forces guide human civilization. Like Nenem, all the villagers deeply believe in their ancestors and the existence of past lives. They see their ancestors as guiding spirits, influencing their present and shaping their destiny. Rituals, traditions, and daily practices are rooted in this belief, reinforcing their connection to the past and ensuring that the wisdom of previous generations remains alive. The old man in the village has a hidden obsession with fire. Whenever he comes across a pile of leaves, an uncontrollable urge to ignite it would surge within him, stirring memories of the past. He sees the ghostly flare of stars arcing from the brow of the hill and falling into deep valley, and calls them “the ghost spirits of husbands traveling to visit their brides” (139). This reflects the villagers’ deep belief in the presence of ancestral and ghostly spirits, where natural phenomena are seen as signs of the supernatural, connecting the living with the dead.

The winding paths and scattered villages reflect a world both mysterious and enchanting, where history, belief, and breathtaking scenery intertwine. The story of the Red Pool is deeply believed by everyone, blending both natural and supernatural elements: “Everyone believed in the story of the red pool, the colour of blood, where ghostly fish swam round and round, wearing bells that tinkled and drove strong men to acts of murderous violence” (149). The pool, said to have the colour of blood, holds an eerie presence where ghostly fish swim endlessly, their tiny bells ringing in the silence. This unsettling sound is believed to possess a supernatural power, driving even the strongest men to uncontrollable violence. While the pool exists as a natural body of water, its legend transforms it into something far more ominous, a place where unseen forces blur the line between reality and myth.

Mamang Dai’s *The Legends of Pensam* seamlessly blends natural and supernatural elements, reflecting the worldview of the Adi tribe of Arunachal Pradesh. Nature is a dominant force in the novel, with rivers, forests, and mountains shaping human lives and destinies. The supernatural, deeply embedded in Adi folklore, manifests through spirits, prophetic dreams, and shamans who bridge the physical and spiritual realms. These mystical occurrences are not treated as separate from reality but as an extension of it, illustrating the Adi people's belief that the unseen coexists with the natural world. By intertwining folklore with reality, Dai creates a world where nature and the supernatural are inseparable, reinforcing the deep cultural connection between the Adi people and their environment. Dai creates a world where myths, spirits, and ancestral beliefs coexist with the physical landscape. The supernatural is deeply embedded in everyday life, with ghostly spirits, omens, and mysterious forces shaping the villagers' perceptions and actions. At the same time, nature plays a vital role, with rivers, mountains, and forests serving as both sacred spaces and symbols of continuity. Dai highlights the unseen’s inseparable link to the seen, intertwining nature, spirits, and destiny.

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