



# The Poetics Of The Threshold: *Pensam*, Liminality, And Relational Agency In *The Legends Of Pensam*

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**Abstract:** In Mamang Dai's *The Legends of Pensam* (2006), the central concept of *pensam*—the “in-between”—serves as a critical liminal threshold where myth, history, and modern transition intersect. This paper examines how Adi women navigate this space, confronting a "gendered subaltern" condition shaped by patriarchal customary laws, rigid gender roles, and the restrictive rituals of widowhood. While characters like Pinyar and Omum experience social isolation and the silencing of their lived struggles, this study argues that they are not merely passive victims of their circumstances. Instead, the narrative articulates a profound model of relational agency that challenges Western paradigms. Drawing on Indigenous feminism and cultural memory studies, the paper highlights how this agency is rooted in collective responsibility, intergenerational continuity, and ecological custodianship. As the primary transmitters of oral tradition, women serve as the vital custodians of ancestral knowledge, myths, and rituals that sustain communal identity. Their intimate environmental wisdom—expressed through agricultural practices and healing—redefines power as a life-sustaining responsibility rather than institutional dominance. By centering the roles of these women as storytellers, mourners, and caregivers, Dai's work performs a decolonising act, restoring "narrative visibility" and "symbolic presence" to voices historically relegated to the margins. Ultimately, the paper concludes that Dai redefines Indigenous strength as the capacity to negotiate the threshold of tradition and change, transforming lived silence into a profound form of cultural authority.

**Keywords:** *Pensam*, Relational Agency, Adi Tribe, Cultural Memory, Gendered Subaltern.

## Introduction

Relational agency in Indigenous contexts cannot be understood solely through modern frameworks of rights, education, or economic mobility. In the tribal societies of Northeast India, it is deeply embedded in cultural memory, oral tradition, ecological relationships, and collective survival. Scholars note that Indigenous women negotiate identity at the intersection of gender, ethnicity, tradition, and socio-political marginalisation shaped by colonial history, patriarchy, and contemporary change (Imsong et al.; Sarkar and Rai; Deka). Literature from this region, therefore, becomes a crucial space for articulating both women's constraints and their subtle forms of agency.

Mamang Dai's *The Legends of Pensam* (2006), rooted in the oral world of the Adi community of Arunachal Pradesh, provides a significant site for examining these intersections. The concept of *pensam*—

the “in-between”—signifies a liminal space between myth and history, tradition and modernity, silence and voice. Through interlinked narratives, Dai foregrounds ancestral memory, ecological consciousness, and communal values while exposing the gendered hierarchies that shape everyday life (Parmod and Kaur; Sarkar and Singh Rai).

Although tribal societies are often viewed as egalitarian, studies show that women continue to experience marginalisation through patriarchal authority, customary law, widowhood practices, and the burden of domestic and agrarian labour (Daimari; Deka). Characters such as Omum, Pinyar, Arsi, Issam, and Sirsiri reflect this “gendered subaltern” condition (Sarkar & Rai). Yet they are not merely passive; as storytellers, mourners, caregivers, and transmitters of tradition, they serve as custodians of memory and communal continuity.

Recent scholarship situates Dai’s work within cultural memory and ecocritical frameworks, where empowerment is understood not as institutional power but as relational agency rooted in community, intergenerational continuity, and ecological belonging (Parmod and Kaur; *IJES*; *IJSSB*). This view aligns with Indigenous feminist thought, which locates women’s strength in their roles as bearers of life, memory, and cultural ethics (Daimari; Imsong et al.).

Against this background, the paper argues that while the text reveals patriarchal and historical constraints, it also articulates alternative forms of agency grounded in cultural memory, ecological knowledge, and narrative presence, redefining relational agency as a collective and community-based process rather than assimilation into dominant power structures.

### **Theoretical Framework**

This study draws on three interrelated perspectives—Subaltern Studies, Indigenous Feminism, and Cultural Memory and Oral Tradition—to analyse Indigenous women’s relational agency in Mamang Dai’s *The Legends of Pensam* (2006). Together, these frameworks view relational agency as a culturally embedded and historically situated process shaped by marginalisation, gendered silence, and collective agency.

Subaltern studies illuminate the position of Indigenous women in Northeast India as doubly marginalised: as members of communities excluded from dominant historiography and as women within patriarchal customary systems (Sarkar and Rai; Deka). In *The Legends of Pensam*, this condition is reflected in the lives of widows, abandoned women, and labouring female figures such as Pinyar, Omum, and Arsi, whose suffering is normalised through ritual and belief. As “gendered subalterns,” their voices remain muted in public and political spheres, yet their experiences reveal the structural inequalities within the community.

However, Dai does not present these women merely as silent victims. As Deka and Dumenil note, suppressed voices surface through memory, oral narration, and symbolic presence. Although women do not articulate resistance in modern political terms, their agency is expressed through endurance, caregiving, ritual participation, and the preservation of ancestral knowledge. Relational agency thus operates within cultural forms rather than in opposition to them.

Indigenous feminist theory further clarifies this relational model of agency. As Joyce Green notes, Indigenous feminism understands women’s relational agency as rooted in community, cultural continuity, and resistance to both patriarchy and colonial marginalisation, rather than in individualistic models of liberation (Green).

Scholars such as Daimari and Imsong et al. argue that while tribal societies are often seen as egalitarian, women’s labour and cultural contributions are rarely matched by decision-making power. In Dai’s

narrative, women sustain family, agriculture, and ritual life but remain excluded from formal leadership. Their strength lies in nurturing, remembering, and transmitting culture, reflecting relational agency grounded in responsibility and relational ethics rather than institutional authority.

The third framework, Cultural Memory and Oral Tradition, highlights the centrality of myths, legends, and ecological knowledge in *Pensam* (Parmod and Kaur; IJES; IJSSB). Memory functions as a living force, shaping identity and belonging. Drawing on Linda Tuhiwai Smith, Indigenous storytelling and cultural memory can be seen as decolonising practices that reclaim suppressed histories and restore Indigenous voices, a process reflected in Mamang Dai's portrayal of women as custodians of oral tradition and ancestral knowledge (Smith).

Women emerge as key custodians of this memory through storytelling, ritual, and mourning, and by foregrounding their role in cultural transmission, Dai restores narrative visibility to historically marginalised voices.

Together, these perspectives show that relational agency in *The Legends of Pensam* is not a linear movement from oppression to autonomy, but an intersectional and culturally grounded process. It emerges through community bonds, ecological knowledge, and narrative continuity, revealing agency as collective, relational, and intergenerational.

### **Adversities of Indigenous Women in *The Legends of Pensam***

Mamang Dai's *The Legends of Pensam* portrays Indigenous women shaped by cultural tradition, ecological conditions, and entrenched patriarchy. Although Adi society is often seen as cohesive, critics note that women remain marginal in social, ritual, and decision-making spheres (Daimari; Sarkar and Rai). Their labour in agriculture, reproduction, mourning, and cultural preservation sustains the community, yet they are excluded from authority.

Patriarchal control within customary practices forms a central challenge. As Deka and Sarkar and Rai observe, rigid gender roles confine women to domestic and caregiving work, while men dominate land ownership, lineage, and ritual power. Thus, women's contributions remain economically and symbolically undervalued. Widowhood further intensifies vulnerability. Characters such as Pinyar and Omum show how women are blamed for misfortune and subjected to ritual restriction and social isolation, exemplifying the "gendered subaltern" whose suffering is normalised through belief and custom (Sarkar and Rai; Daimari). Dai's restrained narrative voice mirrors this imposed silence. Women are also excluded from historical and narrative authority. Although they transmit memory and tradition, oral histories privilege male lineage, relegating women to the margins (Parmod and Kaur). This structural silencing reflects subaltern theory, where women remain culturally central yet discursively erased (Dumenil; Deka).

Colonial and postcolonial transitions further complicate their position. Education, Christianity, and state governance disrupt Indigenous life without dismantling patriarchy, weakening women's customary roles while offering limited relational agency (Im-song et al.). In *Pensam*, women inhabit the liminal "in-between" signified by the concept of *pensam*.

Ecocritical readings associate women with land, fertility, and ecological continuity, marking them as cultural and environmental guardians (Parmod and Kaur; IJES). Yet this responsibility rarely yields ritual or political authority. Dai thus reveals layered oppression—patriarchal control, social silencing, widowhood, historical erasure, and cultural transition—while preparing the ground for an understanding of relational agency rooted in endurance and negotiation rather than institutional power.

## Cultural Memory and Women's Voice

While *The Legends of Pensam* depicts the marginalisation of Indigenous women, it also reveals subtle forms of relational agency rooted in cultural memory, ecological belonging, and collective resilience. Rather than locating agency in individual autonomy or institutional power, Dai, as critics observe, presents relational agency as relational, communal, and intergenerational (Parmod and Kaur; Daimari; *IJSSB*).

Cultural memory transmitted through oral tradition is a primary source of agency. Women preserve myths, rituals, songs, and ancestral histories, functioning as custodians of communal identity. As memory scholars argue, remembrance resists erasure and sustains cultural continuity (Parmod and Kaur). In *Pensam*, women's narrative presence restores symbolic authority to voices historically silenced, transforming memory-keeping into a form of relational agency.

Ecological intimacy further shapes women's agency. Ecocritical studies (*IJES*; *IJARMT*) show that their knowledge of land, seasons, agriculture, and healing practices sustains both family and community. Though excluded from formal leadership, their environmental wisdom redefines power as life-sustaining responsibility rather than institutional dominance.

Indigenous feminist readings also highlight women's quiet resilience. Characters such as Omum, Pinyar, Issam, and Sirsiri endure loss and marginalisation yet preserve kinship, ritual continuity, and cultural values. As Daimari notes, their strength lies in endurance and care, exemplifying relational agency within oppressive structures.

Narrative visibility itself becomes a political act. As Sarkar and Rai argue, Dai's centring of Indigenous women challenges historiographical silence, allowing the subaltern woman to acquire voice and symbolic presence through literature. The movement from lived silence to textual memory marks a shift in cultural power.

Finally, the concept of *pensam*—the “in-between”—frames relational agency as negotiation between tradition and change. Women inhabit this liminal space, sustaining ancestral knowledge while adapting to modern realities (Parmod and Kaur). Thus, relational agency in Dai's work emerges not through overt resistance but through cultural continuity, ecological stewardship, and narrative assertion.

## Intersection of Gender, Culture, and Ecology in Indigenous Women's Relational agency

Indigenous women's experiences in *The Legends of Pensam* are shaped by the intersection of gender, culture, ecology, memory, and ethnic identity (Imson et al.; Parmod and Kaur; *IJES*). The natural environment functions as an active cultural force, structuring belief systems, labour, and social relations. Women's agricultural, nurturing, and healing practices position them as ecological custodians whose knowledge sustains both material survival and spiritual balance (Parmod and Kaur; *IJES*). This environmental embeddedness confers a form of authority beyond patriarchal institutions.

Cultural practices further locate women at the centre of communal life. Though men preside over public rituals, women preserve myths, perform mourning songs, and transmit traditions. As living archives of memory, they occupy a symbolic centrality within Indigenous epistemologies, challenging their apparent marginality.

Historical transition complicates this position. Colonial and missionary influences, along with modern education, disrupt customary systems while often intensifying gender inequality (Imson et al.; Deka). Dai's women inhabit this liminal historical moment, negotiating continuity and change. Their relational agency thus appears not as linear emancipation but as cultural adaptation.

As Sarkar and Rai note, Adi women experience layered marginalisation as both gendered and tribal subjects. Their agency emerges at the intersection of ethnicity, ecology, memory, and gender. By situating women within land, ritual, and history, *The Legends of Pensam* redefines relational agency as the capacity to sustain life, preserve culture, and negotiate transformation within Indigenous worldviews.

### **Gender, Ethnicity, and Agency in Indigenous Narratives**

Although *The Legends of Pensam* is rooted in Adi cultural history and oral tradition, its portrayal of Indigenous women reflects the continuing realities of tribal women in Northeast India. Scholars such as Deka, Daimari, and Imsong et al. note that patriarchal control, economic dependency, cultural silencing, and exclusion from decision-making still shape women's lives. Literature thus functions not only as cultural record but also as a lens for understanding ongoing struggles for relational agency.

Modern development and state intervention have produced mixed outcomes. While education and legal awareness offer new opportunities, traditional support systems have weakened, and women remain largely marginal to political and economic power. This contradiction mirrors the liminal condition signified by *pensam*, where tradition no longer fully protects and modernity does not ensure liberation.

As Sarkar and Rai argue, the subaltern status of Indigenous women extends beyond Dai's fiction into contemporary social reality. Their silenced voices and invisible labour persist, yet increasing participation in education, writing, and community leadership signals emerging forms of agency. Dai's literary representation itself becomes an empowering act by restoring visibility to Indigenous women within Indian English literature and critical discourse.

The novel's emphasis on cultural memory and ecological knowledge also resonates with current concerns about Indigenous epistemologies and environmental justice. Ecocritical perspectives highlight women's traditional knowledge of land and sustainability as vital in the present ecological crisis. By portraying women as custodians of culture and nature, Dai anticipates contemporary links between relational agency, environmental stewardship, and community resilience.

Thus, *The Legends of Pensam* connects past and present, showing relational agency as an ongoing process shaped by history, cultural negotiation, and collective struggle. It affirms the relevance of Indigenous women's voices in current debates on gender justice, cultural survival, and inclusive development.

### **Conclusion**

Mamang Dai's *The Legends of Pensam* thus engages with the complex and layered sense of Indigenous women as viewed along the intersections between gender, culture, memory and ecology, and one which is resourced deeply from an Adi oral tradition that intimates at how we can imagine relational agency in a context like the Indigenous to not simply be read within legal terms for equal rights or institutional power but much more culturally based and relational. This research has revealed that women in *The Legends of Pensam* are doubly marginalised: as tribal subjects on the periphery of the nation-state and as females living in a male-centric society and suffer from patriarchal practices, ritual exclusion, widowhood economic dependence, and narrative silence to form an intersected structure, making them doubly silenced just like characters such as Omum and Pinyar, whose lives are trapped by silent resistance. At the same time, Dai reveals alternative forms of relational agency rooted in cultural memory, ecological knowledge, and communal resilience, in which women serve as custodians of oral histories, ritual practices, and environmental wisdom, sustaining Adi identity across generations and transforming silence into symbolic voice and marginality into narrative presence. By placing women within the liminal space of *pensam*—between myth and history, tradition and change—Dai redefines relational agency as negotiation rather than confrontation, advancing a relational and community-centred model of agency that challenges

individualistic feminist paradigms and aligns with Indigenous feminist thought. Ultimately, *The Legends of Pensam* affirms that Indigenous women's strength lies not only in resistance but also in their roles as bearers of memory, life, and continuity, reimagining relational agency as collective, ecological, and intergenerational.

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