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Introspecting on Adivasi Rights: A Critique of C K Janu's Autobiography *Mother Forest: The Unfinished Story of C K Janu*

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Abstract

Mother Forest: The Unfinished Story of C.K Janu (2003) is an autobiography of C.K Janu, a tribal rights activist from Kerala. The paper examines how Janu narrates the essence of the tribal culture and its shared sense of mutuality with the environment. Describing the enriched experiences of tribal society, achieved through ecological practices, Janu focuses on the fact that the tribal society maintains an inherent relationship with the forest. The indigenous philosophy of life and its impact on the sustenance of forest terrains is highlighted in the narrative. The paper also examines the politics of power while analyzing Janu's role as an activist for tribal land rights. The insensitivity of the system towards tribal culture and tribal land rights is critiqued against the backdrop of the contemporary and contentious socio-political scenario.

Keywords: Autobiography, Tribal Lives, Ecological Consciousness, Tribal Land Rights

C K Janu's Mother Forest is an autobiography that narrates the life of C K Janu as a tribal activist from Kerala. Autobiographical literature incorporates a gamut of forms, ranging from formal book-length narratives to intimate writings created during one's lifetime, which may not be aimed at publication "including letters, diaries, journals, memoirs, and reminiscences" (Mirza 1). The term 'autobiography' was first used in 1797 by William Taylor in the English periodical, *The Monthly Review*. Tracing the roots of autobiography takes us to a literary form known as 'apologia', which existed in ancient times and aimed at exemplifying or justifying one's actions and life without necessarily aiming for self-documentation. Autobiographical

literature, whether communicated orally or in written form, functions as a means of self-expression. It goes by various names in literature, including life narratives, diaries, memoirs, and self-biographies. Autobiographies serve as firsthand historical documentation, offering personal perspectives on different periods and cultures. Additionally, they provide comfort and motivation for readers to deal with similar struggles, inspiring resilience, and empathy. For authors, recounting their own stories can be a therapeutic process, facilitating healing and deeper introspection. Most significantly, autobiographies play a crucial role in preserving history, ensuring that future generations can gain a nuanced understanding of past and present cultures.

C K Janu was born in Chekot, near Mananthavady, a tribal village in Wayanad, Kerala, to humble parents belonging to the Ravula community, recognized as Adiya. This community, formerly indentured labourers, carried the weighty title of 'Adiya,' symbolizing their historical bondage, mainly as landless agricultural workers. Janu began her journey as a labourer at the age of seven, working as a domestic helper in a local schoolteacher's home for five years. At thirteen, she transitioned to manual labour, earning a meagre daily wage of Indian Rupees 2. Despite financial hardships, Janu's determination led her to acquire tailoring skills and open a small shop, which unfortunately was closed due to financial constraints. Despite lacking formal education, Janu seized the opportunity to learn to read and write through a literacy drive in Wayanad.

Janu ascended through Kerala's Karshaka Thozhilali Union, affiliated with the Communist Party of India, becoming a vocal advocate for tribal rights. Leading a tribal movement in Wayanad's Tirunelli forest, she garnered recognition as an activist. Post-1987, Janu embarked on a journey among tribal communities, galvanizing them against injustice. Following her tenure with the union until 1987, Janu set off on her journey as an activist across tribal settlement to understand and raise the aspirations and challenges of the tribal community. Janu stands as a symbol of empowerment and resilience laying an indelible mark in the Kerala social landscape. Her fight for justice and equality is a testament to grassroot activism.

Janu: The Life Story of CK Janu, was published in Malayalam in 2003, and subsequently translated into English by N Ravi Shanker bearing the title *Mother Forest: The Unfinished Story of C K Janu.* This is not the complete autobiography of C K Janu but rather considered as a memoir. Janu, as she says, is writing a complete autobiography which she intends to publish shortly. *Mother Forest: The Unfinished Story of C K Janu* holds literary and political relevance

primarily due to the scarcity of autobiographical works authored by tribal activists providing readers with insights into the life and travails of tribal life. Though fictional portrayals of tribal life populate the literary realm, autobiographical accounts infused with the essence of tribal experiences are a scarce commodity. The indigenous philosophy of life and the nuances of tribal culture have adequate literary representation, but Janu's work validates the experiences with a touch of 'the real'. In her memoir, the profound cultural tapestry of the tribal culture and their bond with nature are represented from a deeply personal perspective. A discussion of *Mother Forest* brings to light the plight of the Adivasi community in the contemporary social environment.

Tribals in the Indian Subcontinent are referred to as 'Adivasis' (first inhabitants), a term that signifies their political and cultural identity. It is often employed with other terms like 'indigenous', 'aboriginal', and 'native' interchangeably which means 'born' at a certain place, and who have never migrated. Tribal literature, with its intimate connection to nature and affinity to safeguard the cultural nuances, remains largely undefined and unexplored, despite the existence of elements such as tribal society, language, and oral tradition. The term "Orature" signifies literature of oral tradition among tribal communities suggesting the fact that contemporary written literature is an extension of their rich oral traditions. The concept of Orature was initially put forward by Ugandan tribal writer Pio Jirimu and is embraced by tribal writers across the globe. The concept highlights the continuity between oral and written expressions within tribal cultures and thereby acknowledges the intrinsic value of storytelling and oral history in shaping literary traditions. Janu's autobiography is also a form of 'orature' in the sense that it was a narration recorded and written down by the writer Bhaskaran.

Tribal literature in India though varied in structure and style has a thematical common ground. Issues of exploitation, the identity of the marginalized, land rights, and integrity with nature are often found to be the concerns addressed in tribal writings. Narayan, the first tribal writer from Malayalam who authored the novel, *Kocharethi*, Hansda Sowvendra Shekhar, the tribal writer from Jharkhand who wrote *The Adivasis Will Not Dance*, Mamang Dai, from the Adi tribe of Arunachal Pradesh who penned the novel *The Legends of Pensam* are some of the tribal writers from across India whose texts have been referred and cited to drive the point that Adivasi literature across India has points of similarity in the representation of tribal culture. Janu's narrative attains significance in the literary scenario of tribal literature in the sense that it is a narrative of her personal experiences as a tribal woman.

Janu's narrative offers a vibrant picture of the profound bond between the Adivasi community and the forest, often revered as their 'mother forest'. Janu recounts their youthful escapades of adventure—tasting honey, gathering fruits and roots, fishing, and coaxing crabs from the marshlands. Amid her narrative, there is an overwhelming sense of abundance and richness reflecting their deep-seated connection with the forest. She recounts:

> When young all of us children would go to the ridges of the fields to pick chappa or to the little stream to catch fish or else to lure out the crabs hiding in the slush of the fields or to roam aimlessly in the woods or to pluck wild fruits like karappayam mothangappayam or kanjippayam…or just relax slipping our feet lazily into the cool water or bring home pieces of cane, in the forest one never knew what hunger was, we would build up wild tubers and eat them. (Janu 2)

Indigenous narratives and experiences offer vignettes of the meaningful interaction that happens between human-ecological spaces. The essence of ecology is inculcated as an element of life denoting the idea of co-existence. The environment is never a wall apart but an integral part of the flow. The flora and fauna, the entire ecosystem thrive with human existence, mutually benefitting and enriching one another. Janu's narrative encapsulates the essence of the forest which throbs with humans, a soulful experience that emanates a sense of fulfilment.

The narrative paves the way for a critique of modern society and its administrative and political system that relegates the tribal culture to the margins. The usurping of land rights and encroaching on the forest locations inhabited by the tribes are critiqued. As an activist and observer of her community and people, Janu's emergence as the face of the people who fought for their land rights is justified. Direct experiences of injustice and manoeuvres of the political parties for material gains, have moulded Janu as an activist for tribal rights. Many Adivasis have lost their land in the intricate legal labyrinth of modern society. The Adivasi way of life serves as a poignant example of how the innocence or ignorance of a community can be exploited for the usurpation of their land and resources.

For the Adivasis, integrating with the forest was intrinsic to their existence. Janu recounts moments of sitting amidst crackling wood, in tune with the forest's whispers, immersing themselves for hours. Her stories brim with heartfelt encounters, demonstrating the intimate bond the Adivasi community holds with nature. Their narrative illuminates the forest's constant and seamless integration into their daily life, shaping their customs, ideologies, and insights, fostering a supreme intimacy with nature. They possessed a unique ability to read the subtle language of rustling leaves and forest murmurs, attuned to every movement and sound. She

fondly recalls how during the younger years, lamps were a rarity in their huts how they used to sit in the yard enveloped by darkness, spending hours listening intently to the murmurs of the forest or gathering around a blazing fire, roasting wild roots for comfort and warmth. (Janu 3)

In her perspective, the forest stood as a stronghold, a sanctuary guarding them from the threats of the world. It offered solace like a maternal embrace, alike the safety of a mother's womb where Adivasi children found hope and protection. Whenever confronted by the disconcerting presence of strangers, the forest became their anchorage, a place of refuge and comfort. For them, the forest personified a motherly essence, fostering and safeguarding in every possible way.

> …if strangers came we just melted into the forest would not even go near them, just scampered away, the adults used to frighten us by saying that the people in white dhotis and Shirts ate buffalos and bulls, so if any stranger appeared on our hands we ran into forest, no one knows the forest like we do, the forest is mother to us, … she never abandons us. (Janu 5)

C K Janu's reminiscences of her childhood friend, Ammini, highlight the profound connection the Adivasis have with the land and its biodiversity. This underscores their inherent rights and intimate understanding of the forest's terrain. “She knew about the plants needed for snakebites. When we walk through the forest she could make out the birds from the sounds they made and easily locate the directions in the forest. Ammini could catch the spoor of an elephant quite quickly, she knew everything about the forest.” (Janu 22)

Janu’s reflection on her friend is a pointer to the deep connection, tribal community shares with the environment which modern society lacks. The narrative also highlights the responsibility of the system to safeguard the traditional knowledge owned by the indigenous culture; knowledge that the textbooks can never impart.

The autobiography beautifully articulates how the religious beliefs of the Adivasis intricately intertwine with the fabric of the natural world:

> In our community there are no gods or goddesses like among Hindus…when we were young there used to be a big tree near our hut in Thrissileri and a stone placed underneath it. we used to worship that our forefathers rested there. Once in a year, we appeased them…. the area around the tree would be cleared of the bushes and swept clean. (Janu 19)

As highlighted, religion was a philosophy of life for the community rather than a practice. Contrasting contemporary culture with indigenous practices reveals potential trails to maintain eco-sensitivity and cultivate a way of life that complements the ecology around.

Integration with nature is a recurrent theme in Adivasi literature. Mamang Dai, the writer from the Adi tribe of Arunachal Pradesh, recounts the supple bond they nurture with nature around them. In the story "Small Histories Recalled in the Season of Rain", she portrays the Rain Mother, as a frequent vision in dreams who is imagined as perched upon the treetops, with laughter. She invokes an essence of nature by describing the laughter of the rain mother mingling with the mist and the melody of the raindrops being sung in the wind. (Dai 36)

Gladson Dungdung, an activist from Jharkhand who works for the tribal society, beautifully portrays a vibrant tribal culture, showcasing the entwined histories of the Adivasis and the Forest. Dungdung observes the tribal way of life in *Mission Saranda* thus: "a society that takes from nature for need rather than greed. Greed is prevented through restraints and taboos" (xviii). In the forward to Dungdung's *Mission Saranda*, Felix Padel quotes the tribal attitude to the forest in the words of a Dongria Kondh woman thus: "We need the mountain and the Mountain needs us" (qtd in *Mission Saranda* xviii). This accentuates the idea of coexistence. Additionally, the constraints and taboos hold significance in safeguarding ecology. Indigenous practices thrive in environmental sustainability. The Adivasis' bond with the ecosystem, with the forest, has been marked thus in Dungdung's *Life for Livelihood*: "Their land and forest are not only essential livelihood resources but their sole identity, culture, tradition, ethos, spirituality, autonomy and social security." (qtd in *Adivasis and Their Forest* 13)

Dungdung in *Adivasis and Their Forest* again cites an example of the tribal way of life illustrating the subtleties of tribal-forest mutual sense of reliability:

> They do not merely use forests as their livelihood resources but they also cultivate plants, protect and conserve the forest, and scientifically use many resources to meet their needs, for instance, they cut some branches of a tree for domestic use rather than the whole tree, so that the tree survives and new branches branch out next year, and they avoid cutting bamboos in the rare years when bamboo flowers. (Dungdung 14)

The enriched and sustainable lifestyle of tribal society stands in stark contrast to the contemporary world and its way of life rooted in consumerist practices.

Janu's narrative, apart from the tribal philosophy of life, critiques the political climate which indisputably ends up manipulating the tribal community. The Chengara and the Muthanga struggle was an act of resistance against civil insensitivity in seizing the rightful land from the hands of the community in the wake of an absence of law that protected them. As observed, "She calls the struggle for land to Adivasis not a political one but a struggle against another

culture(meaning the normal Kerala Culture). She says retrieval of land will help them retrieve their culture." (Ravi Shankar, Vii, Introduction to *Mother Forest*)

The Hindu reported on the recent cabinet decision letting the tribals transfer their land to non-tribals through the Orissa Scheduled Areas transfer of Immovable Property (OSTIP). Many instances were recorded where small areas of tribal land were handed over to non-tribals in exchange for a bottle of local brew. The report also shows the tribal culture considers land as an invaluable asset. (The Hindu, Nov 23, 2023 pg7) The recent order in Orissa raises questions on the exploitation of tribals at the hands of civil society in terms of the susceptibility of the tribes resulting from a lack of awareness of the law and their identity as people in the margins. Janu also raises a similar observation in her autobiography on the role of the migrants and political parties in lending the tribes landless. Resistance to reclaim what is lost in unjust is evidenced in her agitation. Janu also narrates the incident of the tribal people's attempt to reclaim their rights over the burial ground. She remembers,

> We used to perform certain traditional rituals and gaddiga there, Later people occupied the land. They fenced up the land on all four sides of our burial ground. … A situation developed where we would soon have no place to bury our dead. So, I along with my people went to that place and built a fence to separate it from other lands. (Janu 39)

Janu's narration provides a picture of institutionalized looting practiced by civil society for encroaching on the Adivasi land. Janu's fight was against the system which held itself blind to the plights of Adivasis. It was a resistance that emerged from anger and resentment towards ineffective political intervention in issues of Adivasis. She points fingers at how the transfer of land in Adivasi terrain should take place in a transparent way ensuring justice to the tribal community.

The tribal writer from Jharkhand, Hansda Sowvendra Shekhar in the story " Adivasis Will not Dance " makes a critical observation on how Adivasis were manipulated by the politics of power. Through the voice of an Adivasi dancer in his story, he says how the Adivasis feel being treated like toys at the pressing of a button to say 'yes'. They feel that society/the system triggers their movements with the press of a button or the turn of a key, and the Santhals, begin their rhythmic beats on the tamak and tumdak, or play tunes on the tiriyo, while their sacred dancing grounds are snatched away from them. (p. 170) Here the author was drawing attention to the life of the Adivasi community as viable to exploitation by the civil society.

Narayan known as the first tribal novelist in Malayalam also delves into the narrative of the Mala Araya adivasi community in the early half of the twentieth century through the lives of Kunjipennu and her husband Kochuraman in his novel *Kocharethi*. The story illustrates the exploitation of the community of Arayars by landlords, businessmen, and authorities gradually leading to the tribe's alienation from the mainstream society. Hence themes of exploitation, manipulation of power, and land rights issues recur throughout tribal literature from different parts of India. Janu's autobiography provides a first-hand account of these issues through the lens of her personal experiences. Though experiences of tribal society in different parts of India may differ, themes such as the identity of the marginalized and issues over land rights are common grounds where concerns of the tribal society could be addressed.

Fighting for ownership rights over land is often a turmoil for the tribal community. It is an experience, tribes all over India face regardless of where they belong. Many tribal communities have been living in forest terrain for generations and how to prove their existence in documents is a perplexity encountered by them. Many have lost the trial unable to prove their ownership, miserably failing in the human enterprise of proving one's existence in papers. The tribal society faced this predicament solely because of the lack of money to bribe the office and due to ignorance of the law and its nuances. Once more, individuals find themselves at the system's whim, their lives hanging in the air. The community lost most of its land due to its failure to decode civil society's intricate documentation system. The Adivasi community's silence was exploited to such a degree that it resulted in the exploitation and gradual seizure of their land. Rooted in their learned harmony from the forest, they cultivated a life of peace and coexistence, unused to tendencies for resistance or confrontation, even when their fundamental rights were violated. Their existence entwined flawlessly with the forest, nurturing a lifestyle attuned to tranquillity and harmony, exemplifying the concept of discord unfamiliar. This led to a state of subjugation, borne from their unfamiliarity with dissenting voices. Hence silence was not a symbol of fear alone but could be read as a practice that emerged from a harmonious existence with nature. Janu's narration highlights how migrant labourers from the mainstream society encroached on the Adivasi lives, driven by a desire for profit and commercial success. It reveals the commodification of forests by migrants, further constricting the tribes' way of life. The narrative also highlights the manipulative tactics employed by migrants within the Adivasi community. Janu speaks about how the tribal people had been reduced to mere wage labourers

and how the nurturing embrace of the Mother Forest has now been confined within the boundaries of the Departmental Forest with barbed wires, fences, and guards. (Janu 31)

Janu subtly critiques political systems and organizations, pointing out how politicians often regarded the community solely as voting blocs, showing minimal concern for tribal welfare or their specific issues. Janu's criticism is also at the system that designs projects without a vision greatly affecting their lives. Foucault's notion of the invisibility of power structures resonates strongly in this context. Disciplinary power, he says

> …is exercised through its invisibility; at the same time, it imposes on those whom it subjects a principle of compulsory visibility. In discipline, it is the subjects who have to be seen. Their visibility assures the hold of power that is exercised over them. (Rainbow 199)

The tactic of invisibility in disciplinary power is a deliberate strategy for wielding control. Society is conditioned by the social stigmatization of the tribal culture in the margins in its exercise of power. The psycho-social repercussions of the image that tribal communities are 'people in the margins and still can be' are used as an instrument by the system to impose its invisible control over them. Fighting for the legitimate land rights of the tribal society is a tool wielded by Janu to expose the politics of power that manipulates tribal rights. Janu's critique is aimed at the system for remaining insensitive to the woes of the tribal society. In her memoir, she draws the picture of a tribal way of life rhyming in tune with ecology. *Mother Forest* portrays how the forest was taken care of by the tribal society with a sense of mutuality. It is this concept of mutuality that sustained the tribal culture and the forest. The contemporary culture and the system remain blind to this concept of mutuality and the consumerist mindset ends up ruining ecology and its bounty in the forest. The tribal culture turns out to be just a ploy in the game of power played by the system all over the world!

Notes

Karappayam, mothangappayam or kanjippayam are all wild fruits.
Tamak, tumduk, tiriyo -Traditional musical instruments of Santhals.

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