

Unveiling the Spirit of Life- the Struggles of a Forest Borne Woman: An Eco-Feministic Approach to C K Janu's Autobiography *Mother Forest: An Unfinished Story of C K Janu*

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An autobiography is a self narration. It is the mirroring of one's self. *Mother Forest* is the autobiography of a vibrant tribal leader C K Janu, who hails from the Wayanad district of Kerala. She is still renowned for her leadership in the forty-seven day long sit-in-strike in front of the secretariat, a historical struggle which later waged success without the help of any prominent political party in Kerala. Her autobiography- *Janu: The life Story of C K Janu* was written in Malayalam in 2003. Later it was translated into English by N Ravi Shankar. The book reveals her intimate connection with forest, which she considers as her step mother. As a representative of the Adivasi community, she tries to recollect her good old days spent in the forest and how her community was dependent on forest. They considered forest as a sanctum sanctorum and thus established a frequent connection with the ecology there. The term eco-feminism spots ecology within the spectacles of feminism. It is an academic movement that sees the critical connection between the domination of nature and the exploitation of women. The present study aims to analyze the struggles and hysteric situations faced by Janu, for the rights of the tribal's, whom without forest their lives end up in a mess. Janu being the harbinger of change was the leader of Adivasi Gothra Maha Sabha and stood in the frontier of agitations for the redistribution of land to the landless tribal people. The wilderness of the forest could be traced in her character too.

Introduction

In India, women-led environmental activism and writing has gained an iconic status. It has always stood as a hallmark of grassroot level environmentalism in our country. Mahasweta Devi, Medha Patkar, Arundhati Roy, and C K Janu are some of the prominent women environmentalists of the era. While Medha Patkar led the Narmada Bachao Andolan, Mahaswetha Devi converted her pen into sword to infuse activism in literature for the betterment of tribal people in India. Likewise the booker prize winner, Arundhati Roy wrote on a variety of ecological issues ranging from Narmada Bachao Andolan to Nuclear testing in India. C K Janu protested the breeched agreement between the Adivasis and the state government to provide land to each Adivasi family.

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She created a new turn in the subaltern identity politics in addition to the social justice and ecological balance.

Theoretical Base

Ecofeminism otherwise called Ecological feminism is an interdisciplinary movement which critiques the dominant male practices and discourses relating to nature. It is said to be originated in the United States in 1970's. Ecofeminism extends its ideology into an arena of thoughts such as: nature, spirituality, and politics. Ecofeminist theory questions or rejects previously held patriarchal paradigms and holds that the domination of women by men is intimately linked to the destruction of the environment. The term Ecofeminism was coined by an eminent French Feminist Francoise d'Eaubonne in her book *Feminism or Death* (1974), where she explains the importance of feminism in addressing gender and environmental issues. The recent century has identified Ecofeminism as female ways of being and thinking about nature throughout history.

The term Eco criticism which gained prominence in the dawn of 1990's, is an earth centered approach to literary studies which ascended from the United States. Eco criticism tries to trace how nature is represented in literature. While Eco criticism questions the relationship between literature and the physical environment, Ecofeminist criticism often tries to analyze the traditional representation of the land as innocent, female and ripe for exploitation.

About C K Janu

C K Janu, an eloquent and potent leader is a semi -literate woman .Her autobiography is a transliteration in Malayalam by Bhaskaran as *C K Januvinte Jeevitha Katha* .This is further translated into English by N Ravi Shanker. Janu was born to her Adiyar Parents of Chekkote at Thrissilery in Wayanad district of Kerala in the year 1966. She was a partly literated woman,who started her formal education at an age of seventeen. Her inherent qualities of leadership, cooperation and kindness have been kindled in her tender age itself. Being multitalented Janu worked as a literary instructor among the tribal women, at a time she was an active member of the Communist Party of India (Marxist) and its labour wing KSKTU. Later she parted ways with the party and formed the Adivasi Vikasana Pravarthaka Samithi. Her indispensable efforts for the reclamation of the lost lands of the tribal people were a path breaking struggle and an incredible form of agitation from the part the tribal fraternity.

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An Ecofeministic approach to *Mother Forest*

The first victims of any forms of devastation and disaster are always the marginalized ones in the society. Marginalization expands to form a multi- layered structure when some of the combinations like women, children, disabled, poor, dalits and blacks intersect. Janu's story is weaved out of twice marginalized situations faced by her in the society. She speaks out clearly the pathetic conditions faced by the adivasis, especially the adivasi women who still belong to the double margins set by the society which pretends to be cultured. Through *Mother Forest*, Janu boldly attempts to break the silence imposed upon the adivasi community. Janu being a harbinger of change stands as a mouthpiece for her community. Her attempt to construct new identity and a multitude of dimensions to the realities faced by the adivasi community is remarkable. Her autobiography stands as a bold specimen of cultural resistance.

Ravi Shankar, the translator of this autobiography shares his experience of interviewing Janu as: "she turns out to be one of the wisest people I have ever met." In-between the interview Janu asserts that, "women are the guardians of their culture." She is straightforward and shares her opinions with at most clarity and precision. According to C K Janu, adivasi women are already liberated and lead a life independent of men.

The first chapter recounts the routine work systems and daily life style, which Janu practiced in her tender age. Her life was indispensable from farming and agriculture. She was engaged in every activity in the fields from pulling paddy seedlings to piling up haystacks. Her work extended from dawn till dusk. Janu was even assigned to go to forest for clearing woods. She was tamed as a fearless person since childhood. Janu's description of their work culture explores that there were no gender discrimination among adivasis. Irrespective of age and gender, they did all activities in the landlord's field for the flourishing of agriculture. The protection of farm land was also entrusted with adivasis. Janu describes her experiences of night life spend in *erumadam* (tree house) keeping away wild elephants and pigs from destroying the fields.

Cultural Ecofeminism emphasizes on the natural connections between women and nature as exclusive and unique. The theory supports the concepts of 'mother earth' and femininity of nature. C K Janu remembers how they spend time other than farming. From her accounts of the forest, it served a variety of edibles like karappayam, mothangappayam etc. Forest nurtures her children with whatever they wanted. With a motherly affection, she quenched their thirst and served fish and fruits. Forest remained as a repertoire of prosperity to them. It is the ultimate giver and taker of the boons of nature to mankind. Janu often quotes:" in the forest one never knew

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what hunger was". They enjoyed everything natural. Every sip of honey was life giving and rejuvenating for them.

Adivasis had time and space in their life to accommodate forest into their life. The green cover was their life breath. They were always entrusted with the forest. They had time to hear what forest mumbled to them. They lived a life without lamps. Their lifeline and light was the warmth and the security offered by the mother forest. There existed a mutual respect between the forest and the adivasis, which is in descendance in the so called 'cultured society'. Forest has a rhythm, smell and space for every occasion. People who gets tuned to this rhythmic pace, lives a happy life. It is man's greed that displaced the rhythm of nature. Janu observes that the earth has different smells in different seasons. Climate changes were easily traced out from forest. When it rained in monsoon, she says, "day would turn into night in the forest". The people of Janu's community always led a nature centered life. There existed mutual co-existence among nature and human beings. They had their own natural ways of cattle rearing and farming. Still they were poverty stricken. They possessed no land or money. Nothing was their own. The pretensions of owning wealth or power were unknown to them. They just lived a life in simplicity, trusting mother forest. Since they were not part of the rat race, they enjoyed every aspect of their life: sharing, adjusting and tuning in with nature. "No one knows the forest like we do the forest is mother to us. More than a mother because she never abandon us", exclaims Janu. Trust is a word always related to females, especially mothers. Forest is given a feminine perspective here. She is the giver of every prosperity.

Pictures of Exploitation

Janu portrays how society is changing as the wilderness recedes and industrialization looms. She minutely describes every point of her life inside the forest. She recalls that in her community women do not sing while working in the fields. They chew tobacco. But while rocking babies to sleep, soft lullabies are heard from their mouth. Adivasis were quite afraid of people who are different from them and almost everything. She notices that the bent backs of her people as a sign of generations' long servitude. They work like mere animals day and night in all seasons irrespective of hard weather. Adivasis, especially women were used for ploughing the fields, instead of bullocks. Even the glimpse of jenmi was a terrifying experience for them.

As far as wages were concerned, whatever Janu earned as baby sitter or farm worker were collected by her mother. She was never financially independent. Almost all adivasis were put to

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extreme job practices for a small amount of money. Janu regrets of her tradition for not protesting against lower wages.

Ritualistic Practices:

Vandana Shiva in her book, *Staying Alive: Women, Ecology and Survival in India* describe that, "Forests have always been central to Indian Civilization. They have been worshipped as Aranyani, the Goddess of the forest, the primary source of life and fertility. The forest as a community has been viewed as a model for the societal and civilization evolution. The diversity, harmony and self sustaining nature of the forest formed the organizational principles guiding Indian civilization; the forest culture (*aaranya samskriti*) was not a condition of primitiveness, but one of a conscious choice. (shiva, 58). In Janu's community too, there existed tree worship and other rituals. They believed that their forefathers rested under the tree in a stone. Yearly once they appease their forefathers conducting rituals. Other than tree worship they performed *gaddika* when someone was sick and invokes *maari* and exorcise the evil spirit. She also explains that there existed puberty rituals too. Janu recollects that in her community women were generally very close to each other. Janu's descriptions of the forest festival at Valliyoorkavu temple explain simplicity of life. During the festival day they walked freely around enjoying songs from loudspeaker relishing puffed rice. Community rituals were performed when there was no work for them in the fields. The festive land was adorned with variety of events such as magic shows, cyclist's carnivals, exhibition stalls and small shops selling calenders with pictures of film actors. Janu recalls that their people had involvement in the festivals at valliyoorkavu, but as time shed its leaves they were confined to the outskirts of temples and later that too vanished.

Political Party Involvements:

Janu was active in the literacy program under the guidance of communist party in their area. She and her friend ammini went to literacy classes where most of them were women. An upper class girl was assigned to teach them for one year with fixed payment. After giving some basic lessons she disappeared. Later they were taken for party meetings and rallies like mere cattles.

With the advent of migrants from the south, the exploitation of men and land became a common seen. They encroached all hill sides and cultivable lands. With the arrival of migrants tribal people started mingling with civil society. They were used by the migrants for a bottle of arrack, tobacco or even a saree. In the second part of Janu's autobiography, she laments on the fate of her people being turned mere labourers. They lost their natural habitat with the intervening of

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changing ruling parties. The forest department came and every place in forest were fenced and put under surveillance. Natural farm lands paved way for advanced production centres. Land was torn into fragments. The jenu, migrants and the party people played four games on the poor tribal people. They were victimized and an impression was created that the party stood for them, but was not. Party people got bribes from the landlords and settled the agitations rose from the adivasi community.

Another issue created after the entry of party people into the forest was with that of women. A lot of unwed mothers started appearing in the adivasi community. The party people and its workers have a great deal in creating unwed mothers. There are women still who bore babies for a pinch of tobacco or a stone necklace or some food. Girls were taken to hostels in the name of their better education and were misused in many ways. All these severe atrocities against women remained unacknowledged before the civil society.

Political parties considered the tribals as just vote banks. Other than that they were kept silent and not given as opportunity to speak out their problems. Here lies the daring character of Janu, to part ways from party and to form a separate organization which stood up for the rights of the tribals. Her journey from the hill locks of wayanad to till the front gate of Kerala secretariat shows her potential to bring out the realities and speak for the rights.

Through her story, C K Janu, idealizes the tribal society based on her experiences. The social, political, economic and psychological impacts of invasion on women and environment in an ecological perspective are the fundamental issues raised in this book. This autobiography showcases how female discourses about environment weave together concerns about ordinary life and explores the questions of community, gender, domination and exploitation.

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