

Mother Forest: The Rhythm of Harmonious Coexistence

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Abstract

Mother Forest, the autobiography of C.K. Janu, who is a well-known tribal activist from Kerala, vividly blur up the demarcations of the nature-culture binaries of the so-called civilized people. Being a tribal woman herself, Janu's life, culture, and experiences are rooted in the forest and hence are intertwined with nature. It was the encroachments into the forest and the exploitations that it began to encounter that transformed Janu who was born in the forest and grew up along with it into an activist. Therefore, the paper attempts to explore the interconnectedness of the lives and lifestyles which are portrayed in the work with its physical environment that is forest, by analysing it from an ecocritical point of view. The paper also attempts to analyse how far the autobiography of Janu - "Mother Forest" - also becomes the autobiography of the forest itself.

Keywords: Coexistence; Culture; Ecocriticism; Ecology; Forest; Nature; Tribal life.

Introduction

Mother Forest is the autobiography of C.K. Janu who is a prominent figure in Kerala known for her brave initiatives towards tribal emancipation and particularly in the assertion of the property rights of tribal community. She was born on a rainy day to Kariyan and Vellachi of Chekkote at Thrissilery of Wayanad district of Kerala in 1966-67. She received no formal education yet learned to read and write by the age of 17 through the Kerala literacy mission and even worked as literacy instructor amongst tribes. She was an active member in CPIM (the Communist Party of India - Marxist) and worked in their labour wing called KSKTU Kerala Samsthana Karshakathozhilali Union. However by 1991 she parted ways with the party and formed Adivasi Vikasana Pravarthaka Samithi [Organisation

for tribal Development Workers] in 1992. She participated in several national and international conferences and talked about the reclamation of tribal lands in full throated ease.

Ecocriticism, is a literary theory that focuses on the inter-relationship that persists between literature, nature, ecological discourses and environmental activism. The term was coined by William Rueckert in his essay "Literature and Ecology: An Experiment in Ecocriticism" (1978). Laying the groundwork for a new theoretical direction in literary studies, Ecocriticism critically reviews the representation of nature and landscape in literary and cultural texts whilst examining the attitudes towards nature and the rhetoric employed in narrating it. (108) It further emphasises the co-existence of nature and all creatures in it, including that of the human beings, along with bringing in an earth-centred approach in literary studies.

Ecocriticism takes as its subject the interconnections between nature and culture, specifically the cultural artifacts of language and literature. The fundamental questions raised by the eco-critics like; How is nature represented in a work? What role does the physical setting play in the plot of a narrative? Are the values expressed in the particular work consistent with ecological wisdom? How do metaphors of the land influence the way we treat it? How can the nature writing be characterised as a genre? In addition to race, class, and gender, should place become a new critical category? (Glotfelty, 19.) etc can be easily read out from the work *Mother Forest*. It is because of this fact that the work which is woven with experiences which are rooted in a culture which is intertwined and truly merged with nature, particularly forest, become the biography of the forest when read from an ecocritical point of view.

Content

Mother Forest, the autobiography of C.K. Janu often at times becomes the biography of the Forest too. Involvement of ecology in the text is visible right from the title of the book, that is although the original Malayalam version of the book is titled "Janu" it turns to be *Mother Forest* in its English translation. The entire work paints us a picture of the transformation of the forest from accommodating, friendly forest of the tribes to incomprehensible and commercial forest of encroachers. Being the story of the life of a tribal woman who lives right in the lap of nature each and every moment of her life is related to the ecology that surrounds her, making the first law of ecology by Barry Commoner worthwhile that is "everything

is connected to everything else" (qtd. In Rueckert, 112). By respecting that mutual connectivity she even chooses to use "we instead of "I. Therefore the story of Janu becomes the story of a community who are the real children of nature, whose displacement becomes the displacement of the forest itself. Their occupations, festivals, celebrations, gods, and musical instruments are nature-bound. And this cultural affinity with nature makes them mutually inter-dependent.

Janu and the people in her community lead a life which was rooted deeply in nature. For them work meant pulling out the paddy seedlings, transplanting them in the fields, weeding, watering, reaping, threshing, drying the straw in the sun, tying up the heap of hay, and so on. They worked with their naked feet on land and when the landlords for whom they worked remained oblivious about their needs and provided them with meagre wages which never catered to satisfy their hunger, the forest herself provided them with foodstuffs like wild tubers, fresh water fishes, crabs, wild fowls and so on. They lived as closer to nature that they could sense the presence of elephants from their spoor. They just feared away the animals that came to their fields by lighting the fire or making a din, Rather than hurting them.

Nature was part of their leisure too. Children roamed around in the forest gathering tubers, catching crabs, water snakes, fish, wild fowls and so on in the day time when their parents were working out in the fields. And during nights they gathered in their courtyards and listened to what the forest mumbled. Therefore, the forest is here being treated as a human being who has a language to mumble as making the stand point in ecocriticism worthwhile, that is the view that "nature is silent might well say more about our refusal to hear than about nature's inability to communicate." (Rigby, n.a.). It is to be noted that when the forest is assigned with a voice and language of its own, and the ability to speak or mumble, it is never reduced to a passive entity. They made their thudis and chinis from the materials they collected from the forest like bamboos and animal skins. The children made their playthings from the things around them. That is, Janu says that "when we went to the jenmi's plantations we children would sometimes remove the green sheaths from the banana stems till we got to the core of tender banana leaves as smooth and white as silk, we would play with them pretending to be cloth vendors" (Bhaskaran: n.a.).

Ecocriticism insists that the work under consideration should involve ecology as deeply interwoven with the lives involved in the narrative,

suggesting mutual dependents and coexistence. Such an ideology for no doubt is visible in the life and culture of tribal community, such as to that which Janu belongs. Their lifestyle was moulded very-much by seasons, the children who roamed around in the forest otherwise huddle together inside the house warming themselves by the hearth during the rainy season. Eco-critics favour the term ecocriticism over environmentalism, because when environmentalism has an anthropocentric approach in dealing with the literature, Ecocriticism laid its emphasis in studying the relationship between physical world and human culture. "Ecocriticism implies interdependent communities, integrated systems and strong connections among constituent parts" (Glotfelty, 20). It is in such a context that Janu's description of rainy season becomes significant. She does not just mention its effects on her community instead goes on narrating the changes that it brings to the forest too. That is,

"During the monsoon we hardly dared to go out. There was very little to eat too. Couldn't look for tubers either, leeches swarmed the forests in the rains, and no songs flowed from the chini. When it poured we had to worry about the elephants huddling too close to the huts, and about whether the torrents would wash away the huts or whether uprooted trees would fall on them, the howling wind would be really frightening, innumerable little creatures of the forest would cry relentlessly, day would turn into night in the forest, it would be pitch black all around, the leaves, clustered thick, would sway in the dark and the frogs would go mad croaking". (Bhaskaran: n.a)

Ecocriticism has widely analysed religions and rituals of the concerned places with regard to the sustenance and equilibrium of their respective ecosphere. Compared to the Eurocentric religions which are anthropocentric in nature, rituals, customs, and traditions of tribal community are closely knit with the rhythm of nature. According to Janu, the festivals of Valliyurkavu and Thirunnelly were hosted after the harvest season. The nature who provided them with all the necessities herself becomes their God whom they worshiped. That is, their Gods were not fair fat human figures adorned with pompous jewellery. Instead it is a big tree beneath which a stone is placed. And the rituals were conducted in the cold season when the trees shed their leaves. It was not the calendars or the clocks that told them the advent of the seasons and time. They know them in respect to nature. Their working time was calculated not on the basis of hours, she says that "we had to be in the fields before daybreak and work till it became really dark and the jackals came out howling". And she also says "the wind signals the arrival of the rain" (Bhaskaran: n.a.).

As per the common notion Mother and child relationship is being hailed as the epitome of love. However in the autobiography, love for forest becomes superior to that towards mother. Janu says that "the forest is mother to us. More than a mother because she never abandons us" (Bhaskaran: n.a). Here Janu underlines the Wordsworthian philosophy that "Nature never did betray the heart that loved her" (Tintern Abbey). She also says that the forest often was a refuge for them, as they scampered and melted away in to the forest when strangers come to the forest since none knew the forest well as they do. Even her happiness was bound to the Forest, that is she says that she loves walking so that she could see new forests, unfamiliar pathways, strange hills and little streams.

When Janu was taken from the forest to a town named Vellamunda in order to look after a teacher's child, it appears to the readers that she took her forest with her. It was the ecology which welcomed her rather than the new and attractive buildings and other signs of so-called culture. The things those captured her attention first makes this fact clear. That is what she notices there at the very beginning are strong mud nest made by a hornet between the rafters and tiles and the house lizards crawling on the wooden roof of the house. It was the paintings of butterflies which attracted her most in her dress and she felt the black dots in it like the scattered bees in a beehive when a stone is flung to it. And it is not the glass tumbler which she was using for the first time in her life which caught her attention but the painting of a red flower on it. In other words she could find an essence of nature in everything she set her gaze on. Somehow the movie that she watched from a talkies for the first time turned out to be titled 'Chembarathy' (hibiscus), and the things she remembers in it too are the portrayals of small houses, beautiful hills, streams, and a girl in the film singing a song about the water fall. She experiences everything around her with respect to the forest, and hence she even compares the darkness in the talkies with that of the forest. According to Lawrence Buell a significant characteristics of an environmentally oriented work is that, "The nonhuman environment is present not merely as a framing device but as a presence that begins to suggest that human history is implicated in natural history." All the above instances beyond doubt are the vivid manifestation of the chief character of a work with ecological concerns.

Ecocritical approach does not consider nature just as a stage up on which human story is acted out, but as an actor in a drama. So she is provided with a voice and is attributed with emotions and characteristics of her own. We are made to feel the life that fills the nature when Janu describes different odours of the soil. That is "the earth has different smells in dif-

ferent seasons, different in the rains in summer and in chilly weather, the earth gives out its scent only when we work on it. Fallow land is like a tree untouched by the wind." In-order to make the uncultivated forest in to a cultivable land, they cut down trees and bushes, and set fire on to the undergrowth. Then she says when the virgin earth catches fire it gives out a strange smell, "like it is being roasted alive" (Bhaskaran: n.a.). Here she not only attributes an odour, but life itself to the land.

Among the personalities who make their appearance in the autobiography Ammini appears to be the embodiment of nature. Although she kept her head down whenever she came in to contact with the mainstream society, and unlike Janu abstained from learning and following the normative cultural codes she was self-sufficient with in herself. Although for the gaze of civilization she appears to be savage, she is very much self-contained. Nature was her teacher. She preferred to learn by observing the forest, she could make out every tree in the forest and knew well the appropriate use of every medicinal plant in the forest. She was so close to nature that she could easily sense everything in the nature - she could make out the birds from the sounds they made, could easily locate the directions in the forest, could quickly catch the spoor of an elephant, could quickly sense the coming rain or the summer or the cold. When viewed closely Ammini even becomes an analogy of nature, that is, Nature when left alone has a pure and sustained way of her own, which rather appears to be mystic when viewed from the outside, and quiet normal when stepped in to it. Soil and a woman transplanting the paddy were pictured along with a lesson teaching, how to use chemical fertilizers. Both Janu and Ammini felt it ironic that when the teachers who teach these lessons in the classrooms knows nothing about agriculture, they know its each and every lesson even without going to the schools and reading the textbooks.

As the actualisation of the ecocritical ideology of mutual coexistence of the entire ecosphere, including human beings, the work along narrating the growth of C.K. Janu, traces the evolution of the forest too, which is an inseparable part of her and her community's life. The advent of the migrants from the south along with adversely affecting the lives of tribes, even altered the nature and rhythm of the forest. Both of them were well exploited by the people of the civil society and by the party men. *Mother Forest* turned into the Departmental Forest. It had barbed wire fences and guards. The departmental forest appeared to be a strange entity for the tribes. Children of the tribes began to be frightened of a forest that could no longer accommodate them. All the land belonged to the new migrants who divided the land into fragments and used them for different

types of agriculture. The land began to produce profit instead of yield. Paddy fields began to dwindle when the commercial crops took their place. When the lands of the tribes were encroached upon and the fields became scarce, they were forced to abandon the agriculture and look for other kinds of jobs. All land disintegrated at the hands of its paper-owners who laid them fallow, constructed concrete houses and grew shrubs. The owners who didn't know how to sow kept wailing that agriculture was not paying. The land became a mere commodity to be sold and bought. Fences and walls fragmented all the land. A false society came into being which sighed heavily, worrying about Nature from the cosy confines of an armchair.

Critics of ecocritical theory have always been worried about the adverse effects of human interventions on the natural rhythm of ecological balance. "Present environmental crises are warnings that we have delayed nearly too long. [...] we are in an environmental crisis because the means by which we use the ecosphere to produce wealth are destructive of the ecosystem itself." (Rueckert, 116). He farther comments that the payment of its prize can only be delayed, and can never be avoided. (116). It is the same worries gets reflected *when* Janu in her *Mother Fores* narrates with pain the commercialization of ecology without a bit of concern. She mentions about a new generation of migrants who bought land at a high price for their leisure and vacations. They created artificial lakes and lawns in their courtyards and fields. They wrote article after article lamenting the state of the environment. They created fat files out of all the research done by them. By the end of March they sold panel discussions and paintings about the rivers drying up. Editors put on the work in their glasses and wrote articles in special editions, while the real children of the soil who dwelled in togetherness with nature were uprooted and dislocated from their land. Even the forest was gravely wounded for it went through fragmentation and the cultivation of unfamiliar crops. Moreover, the activities of these people in no way resulted in reviving the equilibrium of the forest, which she had before their encroachment in to her heart with sheer profit motives.

"Some sense of the environment as a process rather than as a constant or a given is at least implicit in the text. [...]" is yet another feature of a work with ecological concerns as identified by Lawrence Buell. This is what gets manifested in the work, when it comes to the narration regarding the transformation of Janu from a mere tribal girl to an 'Adivasi' leader. Nature/forest has a vital role in sowing the seeds of activism in the mind of C.K. Janu. She was closely bound to nature for she knew that the lives

of the people of her community became a life only in connection with the *Mother Forest*. In spite of the fear she inherited for generation she rose to raise her voice for the first time to get back the cremation ground of her community [Kurumarchira] in Thrissileri from the encroachers who enclosed it with fences around. A thing to be noted here is that the tribes who lived in company of the forest for very long had never built fences that is unlike the civil society they never distinguished themselves from nature creating a nature-culture binary, which in fact results in the up-rootedness of both nature and culture. When the land was reduced in to a mere commercial object to be bought and sold and when the forest was fragmented in to small pieces of lands by the fences, the land began to acquire new and more survey numbers of which the natives of the forest were unaware of, for the forest so far communicated to them by their mutual contact and not by numbers. This transformed the real inhabitants of the forest, to landless tribes and this which stirred the mind of Janu led her to encroach up on the hills of Thirunnelli with 45 families. Janu while raising her voice for the property rights of the tribes, even protests against the encroachment of the forest land by the civil society and hence at this point she even emerges to be the mouthpiece of nature.

Ecocritical analysis of a text even has its concern on the relationship of nature with the figures of speech employed in it. Since the tribes were unfamiliar with the nature-culture binaries human images are compared with the natural objects and vice-versa. She says that when the hill catches fire in the night "it looks as if a human being is being burned alive". And when it rains after torching the 'punam', "the hill looks like a woman with her hair shorn". While describing the strange smell which arise while torching the 'punam' she employs the metaphor of a virgin to refer to the uncultivated forest land. When Janu says that "wild water all blood-red gushing" she is pointing to the fact that the streams are the lifeblood of the nature, which if dried up shall render the universe lifeless. And again points to the fact that trees are the beloved children of the forest through her simile that "when it rains the giant trees all bend down and become as small as infants" (Bhaskaran: n.a.).

Towards the end of the autobiography Janu narrates her experience of catching the beetles on gangli flower and putting them in an empty match box. At various levels it becomes an analogy of the experience of the tribes. It is through this analogy, which she has drawn from the nature she paints the real picture of what the mainstream society has done to them. They were up-rooted from their vast forest and were closed down within the confines of narrow walls of the colonies. Their pain in the displacement

becomes vivid when she says that “The ginglli flower beetle can survive in the box for many days without food and it never stops humming, which is but a sad hum.” The analogy becomes explicit when she suggests that the beetles too were dark (Bhaskaran: n.a.). When viewed from another perspective the analogy of the beetle becomes the image of the exploited nature. Human beings for their convenience made her suffocate. Her words “The ginglli flower beetle cannot argue with a microphone that makes a great noise” (Bhaskaran: n.a.). reflects on the extent to which the nature is rendered voiceless when humans shout for developments at the top of their voice

Conclusion

Ecologically focused criticism is a worthy enterprise since it directs attention to matters which demand serious thought. “Raising consciousness is its most important task, for environmental problems cannot be solved unless we start thinking about them.” (Glotfelty, 24). The autobiography of C.K. Janu succeeds in filling the readers minds with ecological concerns, by making them travel throughout the warmth of the Mother Forest. Ecology is intertwined even in her mode of narration, that the figures of speech employed including similes even subvert the nature culture binaries.

Tribes are the real children of forests who lead a life which is deep rooted in nature. Since *Mother Forest* is the autobiography of C.K. Janu, a tribal woman, it is set entirely in the forest as her life is inseparable from the *Mother Forest* which is “more than a mother” to her. The eco-critical reading of *Mother Forest* becomes crucial, for it prompts thinking about their lifestyle, value systems, and rituals which enabled them to leave sustainably. The fundamental premise shared by ecocriticism is that, “the human culture is connected to the physical world, affecting it and affected by it.” (Glotfelty, 19). And it is the interconnection between the Nature and culture of Janu’s community being reflected throughout the work. The book, along with tracing the history of the displacement of the tribal community of Wayanad, narrates the transformation of the friendly and accommodating Mother Forest in to frightening and fragmented departmental forest. Moreover in the book, the forest emerges to be a fellow being rather than the physical setting where she lives.

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