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From Spaces of Capital to Oikeion: Survivor-centred Environmental Justice Narrative in *Mother Forest: The Unfinished Story of C.K. Janu*

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Abstract: Environmental justice narratives engage with the disproportionate distribution of environmental benefits among various sections of society. Environmental justice narratives are the one way to challenge and critique the unequal distribution of environmental benefits among people. Rather than relying on the scientific cause-and-effect relationships most other approaches rely on, environmental justice narratives focus on the emotional, affective and relational aspects of the affected. This ‘survivor-centred’ approach will create alternative ways of looking at the environment, respecting the interconnectedness of all biotic and abiotic beings. Thus, critiquing and challenging the “Spaces of Capital”, a term coined by David Harvey, which are the artificial spaces left over by nature extraction and exploitation of the natural spaces. By formulating an alternate way of looking at the relationship between nature and culture, we could find possible ways to create or restore the ‘Oikeion’ to the affected indigenous communities. Thus, creating ‘free narrative spaces’, a term coined by Alan Drengson, which is a kind of meta-narrative without the restraint of a grand narrative. Free narrative spaces enable the fostering of dialogues and preservation measures to restore the lost Oikeion. The study examines these concepts in the work *Mother Forest: The Unfinished Story of C.K. Janu*, written by Bhaskaran and translated into English by N. Ravi Shanker.

Keywords: *Environmental justice, spaces of capital, resistance narratives, oikeion, indigenous communities*

Introduction

“Kerala holds a unique position in the tribal map of India. Most of the tribes of Kerala state belong to the famous family group of Dravidians; they have got similar traits and body stature” (Nithya 730). The 2011 Census report records the overall tribal population in the state as 4,84,839, against 3,64,189 in 2001, putting the decadal growth rate at 0.36 per cent (730). Adivasi communities who live close to nature and whose very livelihood banks on the health and well-being of the natural ecosystem. In the same way, they will have to pay the consequences of mistreating and mishandling the natural world by external forces, owing to their proximity and co-evolution with the natural world. Environmental justice gets prominence here, since it ensures the fair treatment and the rights of the people to have a healthy environment irrespective of their caste, class, ethnicity or race. Adivasis are often disregarded and excluded from environmental policies, regulations and decision-making, hence further inviting the discrimination and marginalization they have faced throughout their lives. This inherently paves the way for environmental injustices. Maantay defines environmental injustice as

The disproportionate exposure of communities of colour and the poor to pollution and its concomitant effects on health and environment, as well as the unequal environmental protection and environmental quality provided through laws, regulations, governmental programs, enforcement, and policies (161).

Gadgil and Guha addressed those people who live close to nature and are dependent on the natural environment to meet their daily needs as ‘ecosystem people’ (3). Similarly, Gadgil and Guha referred to those people who exploit these ecosystem people as ‘biosphere people’, which mostly consists of urban dwellers (4). These ecosystem people are disproportionately affected by the environmental hazards since they live in areas with higher exposure to such hazards. Those areas might be located near industrial waste sites, water disposal facilities or polluted water bodies. As a result, they might be exposed to higher levels of pollution and contamination, and it might affect their health and well-being. “The extraction of resources by the state, other dominant communities and global capital resulted in the alienation of the Adivasis from the land and forest in various historical phases. This is an economic process that has resulted in the spatial, social, economic and cultural marginality of the Adivasis (Rajesh 350). The highest proportion of the tribal workers in the state is that of ‘agricultural labourers’ (47.1 per cent) as against the national average of 36.4 per cent. The occupational pattern of Scheduled Tribes reveals their economic backwardness (Nithya 738).

The theoretical concepts discussed, such as ‘oikeion’ and ‘politikon’, state the former is the home space, where children and women are confined, and the latter is the public sphere, where all the actions take place (Lyotard 135). Swarnalatha Rangarajan delineates *Mother Forest* as a resistance narrative which enables the transition from ‘oikeion to politikon’ and serves as a platform for

expressing an environmental justice ethic that emphasizes care for both indigenous communities and the environment (445). When the state mechanisms started targeting the forestscapes as part of economic rebuild after the independence, the ecological harmony was disturbed. Thereby, the Adivasis are displaced due to state-led developmental projects. Therefore, their activism is born at the intersection of failed state promises, deprivation, displacement, dispossession, etc. As stated by Sudheesh:

Today, poverty, unemployment and hunger are common in Adivasi settlements. Their precarious existence was exacerbated by starvation deaths following the liberalization of the Indian economy and the consequent agrarian crisis in the early 1990s. Whilst the Adivasis face increasing irrelevance to Kerala's growth path, they are also being expelled from multiple livelihood sources (873).

Another standpoint the study dwells on is a statement by a US-based academician, Donna Houston, which states, "Environmental justice narratives usually focus on the 'affective rather than the causal relationships with environmental pollution and degradation'" (428). The affective ties are personal, silent and often invisible, yet they couldn't be fulfilled by the state. But those aspects, in totality, propel the collective struggles against exploitation. The aforementioned aspects will be analysed through the book titled *Mother Forest: The Unfinished Life of C. K. Janu* (2004) written by Bhaskaran and translated into English by N. Ravi Shanker.

Transition from Mother Forest to Departmental Forests

Mother Forest (2004) is the autobiography of C.K. Janu, an Adivasi activist from Wayanad, a district in Kerala. *Mother Forest* (2004) is written by Janu Bhaskaran and translated into English by N Ravi Shanker. The autobiography tells the life of C.K. Janu, from her childhood days to adulthood. Even though it is an autobiography, one cannot find a coming-of-age narration of Janu. Rather, it tells the story of their environment in relation to Janu. The environment is foregrounded more than the protagonist herself, underscoring the significance of the natural world in the lives of Janu and the Adivasis. *Mother Forest* starts with the epigraph, '(N)o one knows the forest like we do. She is a mother to us. More than a mother because she never abandons us' (Bhaskaran 1). *Mother Forest* is written in two sections, the first section dealing completely with the life of the tribal people of Wayanad (a northern district in Kerala, which consists of the largest tribal population in Kerala, followed by Palakkad and Idukki). The first section shows the deeply intertwined, interconnected lives of the tribal population with the natural environment and how much nature is a part of their existence. Each and every aspect of their living is associated and connected with nature, and it is evident from the first section of *Mother Forest*. Planting the paddy seedlings, plantation works, coffee and pepper manuring, labouring in the rice fields and reaping the corns, etc (Bhaskaran 8). C.K. Janu says she and

her people started doing these even before they turned ten or eleven years old. She calls the uncultivated forest as virgin earth and once the undergrowth is set on fire, she feels as if a human being is being roasted alive (Bhaskaran 11). She associates every simple and complex facet of nature with human beings, thus giving it an anthropomorphic outlook. This itself shows the correlation, reverence and attachment tribal people have with the natural environment. This is their homestead before the arrival of the settlers from the central and southern parts of Kerala. Settler population was a serious issue faced by the Adivasi populace. They appropriated the Adivasi land through different means. Adivasi land problems began as early as the 15th century:

The landless Adivasis of Kerala, including the Paniyas, lost access to land and forests through waves of settlement of more affluent communities in the hills of the Western Ghats. They now live in around 5,000 cramped settlements, locally known as ‘colonies’, which were formed over several decades from the 1930s onwards. The land reform implemented in the 1970s consisted of three elements: redistribution of ceiling-surplus land, conferral of ownership rights to tenants and distribution of around 10 cents (a cent is a hundredth of an acre) of kutikidappu bhoomi (housing plots) to landless agricultural labourers (Sudheesh 872).

Mother Forest is a deliberate attempt at portraying the Adivasi lifeworld before and after the arrival of the settler population. Through the work, Janu compares giant trees with babies, the hills with a baby and so on (Bhaskaran 11-13). C.K. Janu talks about the giant trees, the hills, the deep forest, other animals, etc., with such love and respect. These are some of the things ‘civilized’ people are afraid of and always considered perilous, thinking their culturally made landscapes are safe and comfortable to live in. The tribal people are afraid of others, whom they call ‘strangers’, “who wear white dhotis and shirts and who eat buffaloes and bulls” (Bhaskaran 14). She says if “They happen to see these ‘strangers coming to their place, they would run into the forests” (15). For them the safe spaces are always forests and woods. Rather than saying, they will find solace in their huts, ‘they would run into the forests’ is worth mentioning here. To them it is their home or Oikeion, as Lyotard formulated. The second section of *Mother Forest* starts in a different way; the tone of the narrative becomes more intense in this section, It says,

Our people had turned into mere wage labourers. *Mother Forest* had turned into the Departmental Forest. It had barbed wire fences and guards. Our children had begun to be frightened of a forest that could no longer accommodate them... The new migrants divided the land into fragments and used them for different types of agriculture. They (migrants) began to extract profit, instead of yield, from the land. They called them commercial crops (Bhaskaran 30).

The second section of Mother Forest is political, while the first section outlines the Adivasi's close-living with their environment. Mother Forest discusses the issues that led to the famous Muthanga Land Struggle that occurred in 2003. "In the early 1990s, several malnutrition deaths in the Adivasi settlements made it clear that welfare, particularly publicly provided food and healthcare, ensured limited survival" (Sudheesh 874). "The state's official accounts stated that the crucial factors for the starvation deaths of the Adivasis were polluted water and deficiency in nutritious food, high levels of alcohol consumption and an unhygienic lifestyle" (Rajesh 342). These happenings fuelled the formation of 'Adivasi Gothra Maha Sabha' (AGMS), which could be translated as 'Grand Assembly of Adivasi Lineages' (874). The formation of AGMS had been a pivotal step in the formation of a unified Adivasi consciousness among the people. As stated by Rajesh:

AGMS has made conscious attempts to combine the claim for five acres of land, visualisation of agricultural production on that land, and recovery of selected cultural pasts and traditional practices upon that land. A modern Adivasi identity and agency have been emerging through multiple engagements, including struggles, negotiations with the modern state, and contestations over the question of social justice and equitable distribution of resources (352).

The disillusionment with the Communist Marxist Party of India (CPIM) is significant considering the strengthening of Adivasi consciousness. "She (Janu) was also frustrated by the CPI(M)'s present attempts to co-opt autonomous tribal movements, though she added that the party had to make good on its promises to retain Adivasi support" (Steur 33). "It was for the first time in the history of the Adivasi struggles in the state that demands for 'lands for the landless' and inclusion of the Adivasi regions under Schedule V were raised" (Raman 917).

C.K. Janu and her people were working under feudal jenmis (landlords) for many generations. They have to work hard and toil in their own land; they were "landless labourers" (Bhaskaran 32). Then after decades of suffering under the jenmis, the migrants came, and they will come to work with the Adivasi people in farmlands. Not too late, the migrants owned most of the land from the Adivasi people. They would give toddy to the tribals in exchange for the land (Bhaskaran 23). They fought bonded labour, slavery, illegal encroachment of the settlers and the governmental agencies. Bonded labour kept them in perennial poverty and deprivation. Lack of education and awareness among Adivasi men compromised their land for little or less money at times. "The Kerala Schedule Tribes Act (1982) also stipulates that all transfers of Adivasi lands to non-Adivasis are restricted from 1982 without the prior consent of the authorities. Despite this restriction, in blatant violation of the act, transfer of lands continued unabated" (Bijoy 1330).

As Donna Houston argued, environmental justice narratives are always told from the affective, relational aspects rather than the cause-and-effect relationships, of the stakeholders involved (428). Rather than relying on the scientific causal relationships environmental justice narratives usually focus on the affective, emotional and relational aspects of how people cope with environmental pollution and degradation. Environmental justice narratives usually give prominence to those people who are most impacted by the environmental catastrophe, thus challenging and critiquing the dominant narratives that often silence and disregard their demands and needs. Environmental justice movements fight the micro-everyday exploitations faced by the Adivasis. At the same time, it enables the Adivasis to confront the macro structural inequalities imposed on them.

One could read this approach along with the concept 'histories from below' formulated by Lucien Febvre and popularized by Howard Zinn in his book *A People's History of United States* (1980). 'Histories from below' is a historical approach that focuses on the lives, narratives, experiences and histories of the marginalized, oppressed and secluded sections of society. Historical accounts will always focus on the major historical figures that are popular and are well cherished by the mainstream historians. This kind of historical retelling is inherently flawed, because it foregrounds the victories and the fights of the frontmen, deliberately forgetting the hardships the common folk had to endure. Environmental injustices are more than cause-and-effect relationships; there are other factors such as emotions, epidemiology, history, imagination and ontological difference (Houston 432). Concentrating solely on one aspect and excluding all the others won't bring a holistic view and understanding of what led to such an injustice. N Ravi Shanker addresses *Mother Forest* as an unfinished autobiography of C.K. Janu Sreejith Varma calls *Mother Forest* an 'oiko-autobiography'. 'Oiko' means home, Lyotard postulated that political action often takes place in the public sphere. In the case of Adivasis, the line between their public and private spheres gets blurred. Thereby, their private and public spheres are nonetheless the same. This tribal resistance narrative is the testimony of a person who is directly affected, and she is one among the members of the tribal community who were facing historical injustices from time immemorial, starting right from the period of the colonial invasion itself.

This kind of an approach is more valid and credible than banking on the accounts of an outsider who is a total stranger to their culture, ways of living and life. C.K. Janu herself briefs about the deeds such outsiders did to them and their land:

They wrote article after article lamenting the state of the environment. They created fat files out of all the research done by them. At the end of March, they sold panel discussions and paintings about the rivers drying up. Editors put on their glasses and wrote articles in special editions (Bhaskaran 49).

She further says these studies and extensive research done on behalf of them brought nothing to the tribal people. They lived in the colonies that were provided to them “without knowing how to read, washing utensils in restaurants, doing menial jobs in households, becoming unwed mothers, listening to cassette songs” (Bhaskaran 49). “They are always located at the periphery, either in colonies or in remote areas of the forest. In this manner, their social location is permanently configured in the dominant discourses as inferior to mainstream society” (Rajesh 350).

This survivor-centred (addressed them as survivors rather than victims, because through community building and collective resistance they managed to fight the injustices thrown at them to some degree) environmental justice approach proved effective in bringing to fore the hardships the people had to go through because of the traumatic actions of the civil society. Tribal resistance narratives like *Mother Forest* are one way to challenge the dominant narratives and to show alternative ways of co-evolving with nature. Since it is a real-life narrative, it has got an upper hand over any fictional accounts depicting the lives of the marginalized people. Through personal testimonies, experiences and memory, we could expose the systemic oppression and political marginalization the people confronted. Rather than those approaches that rely on causal relationships, this method highlighting the affective and emotional aspects of the people will be more authentic. Sreejith Varma, in his book *Reading Contemporary Environmental Justice Narratives in Kerala*, states that the two sections of *Mother Forest* deal with two different descriptions of Janu’s life:

The first chapter offers descriptions of Janu’s life in the forestscapes of Wayanad district, the feudal system, the agricultural work done by her community members, as well as Janu’s steps towards attaining literacy. The second chapter traces the societal and lifestyle changes that have come over the tribal community; Janu’s association, and her later disillusionment, with the Communist Party (36).

Attaining literacy is one among the major factor amidst other issues such as displacement, land dispossession, exploitation and dwelling. Janu came to know about the deceptions tribal people faced from the members of the communist political party in the guise of empowerment only after she learned how to read. Throughout the book Janu’s thirst for attaining literacy is quite evident. N. Ravi Shanker comments about the wit and observation of C.K Janu,

We (Bhaskaran, the one who wrote the book in Malayalam and Ravi Shanker, the translator) interviewed her extensively and she turns out to be one of the wisest people I have ever met. Her clarity of observation is amazing. And, her language for a woman uneducated in the traditional sense, is amazingly precise (ix).

Even though Janu didn’t write the book herself, when she was interviewed for this book, she was well aware of their rights, the exploitation the indigenes faced at the hands of the civil society,

how to fight against such systemic injustices and so on. This is where these sorts of environmental justice narratives become prominent; it could bring to light the atrocities the indigenes had to face. There are other narratives as well, but those will be based on statistics and other forms of data to unveil their hardships, but those won't have this much vitality and life. The duality, nature vs culture, and the civil society created don't exist among the tribal population, due to their attachment to the forestscapes. The oiko-autobiography of C.K Janu can be termed as or belong to what Swarnalatha Rangarajan called 'New Forest Texts', which are different from the 'Aranyakas' (forest books) of the Vedic period. The Aranyakas are wisdom texts while the New Forest texts are 'volatile spaces in which texts of turbulence are written' (Varma 36). These New Forest Texts could spur the indigenes and the civil society to act accordingly against such inequalities. Because these texts, they stand, even though they talk about nature, forests and the ecosystem throughout the book, are totally devoid of any forms of idealization or romanticization. Those idealized versions could only be seen in the nature writings of the west or the 'global north'. Since nature preservation is something exterior to them, but for the indigenes and the low-income communities it is totally intertwined with their very lives. This is evident throughout *Mother Forest* we could find true depictions of nature without any artistic embellishment or aesthetic language usages.

These narrative spaces can be seen as a 'heterotopia' a term coined by Michel Foucault to denote those counter-sites that exist outside of ordinary spaces and challenge the dominant social order (Dehaene and De Caeter 22). Environmental justice narratives can be seen as a heterotopia because they provide alternative spaces for marginalized communities to voice their experiences, challenge dominant narratives, and advocate for environmental justice. *Mother Forest* being a tribal resistance narrative, can be called a heterotopia since it brings alternative ways of looking at the human-nature interconnection in these times of acute environmental crisis. Not just *Mother Forest*, every other tribal resistance, environmental justice narrative can be viewed as a heterotopia which challenges the dominant social order.

Thereby aiding the formation of 'free narrative spaces', a term coined by Alan Drengson, a Canadian theoretician, which will in turn foster healthy dialogues for the co-existence and preservation of nature. Janu narrates the accounts of the newly arrived migrants who bought their land for a high price. They bought those lands for their leisure and vacations. They made 'artificial lakes and lawns in their land' (*Mother Forest* 49). Thus creating, 'Spaces of Capital' a term coined by David Harvey, which are the artificial spaces left over by nature extraction and exploitation of the natural spaces (Harvey 45). They (outsiders) came to the tribal land, appropriated their land, and made the indigenous peoples alien in their own land by constructing such artificial landscapes. Then the indigenes were displaced and transplanted to colonies (very tiny spaces within the civil society itself); they have no

food, no water to drink or to bathe and the civil society will call them unhygienic. Ministry of tribal affairs 2014-2015 report says that;

Economic globalisation has created opportunities for investment, which has resulted in the displacement of local people and damage to the local ecosystem. Across India, approximately 40 per cent of those displaced by dams, power plants and mines are poor tribal people although they make up only 8 per cent of the country's population (49-50).

The tribal people were further excluded from the 'mainstream society' due to deforestation, loss of agricultural land, displacement and environmental degradation (Gill 3). "It was viewed that these communities remained backward and marginalised because they inhabited an insulated landscape" (Sen 174). Pulido argued: "it is the poor and marginalized who often bear the brunt of pollution and resource degradation whether a toxic dump, a lack of arable land, or global climate change, simply because they are more vulnerable and lack alternatives" (xv-xvi).

Conclusion

Survivor-centred environmental justice narratives such as *Mother Forest* will invite new perspectives and insights about the relationship between human beings and their environment. Since it's reliance on the affective, emotional and relative aspects rather than the scientific cause and effect will revitalize the diverse voices of resistance from the tribal communities. Thereby, aiding in regaining the lost home or oikoumene which is now just another space of capital. This survivor-centred approach, with its emphasis on the agency, resilience and collective resistance against such environmental injustices foregrounds the narratives and experiences of these communities. By giving voice to the silenced, secluded section of society, this survivor-centred approach proposes an environmental justice ethic that emphasizes care for both the indigenous people and the environment.

Adivasi environmental problems are situated at the interstices of indigeneity, class, ideology, geography etc. These multifarious aspects make it an area of intersectional nuances. Addressing events in isolation is insufficient in redressing the hidden structural and systemic violences they have been subject to. Considering the complementarity of the factors, a solution requires an examination of the various aspects which govern their environmental relations. Revolutionary attempts like *Mother Forest* unravel the authentic Adivasi voice and aid in the reclamation of their rights. *Mother Forest* is a testimony of the past ecological trauma, memory, injury, and resilience. The loss of the Adivasis goes beyond material possession to social, cultural and economic aspects which constitute the Adivasi identity. The self-fashioning of Adivasi identity is influenced by their collective struggles and solidarities against state modalities. These modalities displaced them in the first place, causing significant cultural and ecological injury.

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