



Eco- Ethics of Resistance: Environmental Injustice and Tribal Land Relations in *Mother Forest*

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ABSTRACT

The present paper examines C.K. Janu's autobiography *Mother Forest: The Unfinished story of C.K Janu* in the light of eco-ethics, placing emphasis on the entwinement between tribal identity, environmental injustice and resistance. While previous research on the book has focused on marginality, caste and gender. This research places Janu's story as an ecological text that speaks about moral responsibility towards land, forest and community. Janu, a renowned tribal activist and leader from Kerala, describes her own experience of displacement and dispossession, in which forest, land that is central to the survival and identity of her people, gets consumed by modern exploitative systems over time. The paper uses an eco-critical lens to study how *Mother Forest* transcends the genre of personal memoir to evolve into a document of ecological awareness. The testimony reveals that tribal cosmology engages with nature not as resource but as kin and ethics of care and sustainable living. Janu's memories of land loss, livelihood and cultural autonomy are powerful critique of state hegemony, capitalist extraction and environmental tragedy. Her act of resistance to displacement thus is not a socio-political activism but an ethical one that demands justice for environment and community. Through the analysis of the ecological undertones in the narrative, the study brings into sharp relief tribal autobiography as an arena of environmental



thoughts. The act of writing by Janu herself constitutes an ethical intervention, reclaiming suppressed voices and subverting dominant discourses effacing indigenous ecological knowledge. Placing her resistance within the larger context of environmental justice the article contends that *Mother Forest* is a paradigm of an ‘eco-ethics of resistance’ in which identity, activism and ecology intersect. By so doing, the study is a contribution toward a fresh interpretive vision of tribal life-writing as not merely testimony to marginalization but as a venue for ecological ethics, providing critical reflections on sustainable futures and the moral aspects of environmental justice.

Introduction-

C.K. Janu remains one of the most powerful voices in the contemporary Adivasi activism movement in India. Born into the Adiya tribal community of Wayanad in Kerala, her leadership of the Adivasi Gothra Maha Sabha and continuous political mobilization on issues of land rights have positioned her at the center of indigenous resistance movements. An autobiography entitled *Mother Forest: The Unfinished Story of C.K. Janu* weaves together the life story with a socio-political biography that recounts historical dispossession, ecological violence and cultural ruptures through which the tribal communities have suffered. The narrative opens a window into how tribal identity combines with ecological consciousness and political struggle in the life experiences of women. While the latter has indeed gained attention for its representation of marginality, gender and subaltern identity, its ecological dimensions are considerably underexplored. In the world of *Mother Forest*, there is a tribal cosmology underpinning ecological ethics in which the forest is not a resource but a relational presence, a moral entity and cultural anchor. This paper contends that this autobiography needs to be read as a text of eco-ethical resistance in which ecological consciousness becomes inseparable from political struggle against state violence, displacement and capitalist exploitation.

Literature Review-

The latest scholarship on *Mother Forest* has generally approached the text from an ecofeminist and ecological perspective. The article “Adivasi Women and Their Relationship with Nature: An Analysis of *Mother Forest*” by Deeksha Pant and Devendra Kumar Sharma (2024) examines the relation between Adivasi women and nature. Through the lens of eco-feminism, the authors have discussed how



ecology, gender and indigeneity intersect with each other to foster Adivasi women as carriers of ecological knowledge and caretaker of natural resources.

Niveditha George, “Tribal Ecologies of Wayanad: A Parallel Reading of C.K. Janu’s Mother Forest and Adimamakka with Sheela Tomy’s Valli” (2025). In this research paper George gives an Adivasi ecological reading to bring out representations of tribal ecology and critique the post-materialist and Western deep ecological ideas which universalize forest ownership. The work contests romantic environmentalism by foregrounding the lived ecological realities of the tribal communities of Wayanad.

Shruti Das, in her paper entitled “Soft Power, Crises of Existence and the Tribal People of Kerala: A Study of Mother Forest,” elaborately discussed how the Adiya Adivasi people struggled against the exercise of soft power by the State during processes of displacement. Using the soft power concept developed by Joseph Nye, the study discerns contradictions between India’s development agenda and the very survival of indigenous communities, while showing how constitutional protections are still inadequate to prevent land dispossession.

Similarly, the paper “Violation of Land as Violation of Feminine Space: An Ecofeminist Reading of Mother Forest” by Madhavan and Sharmila Narayana engages with the text through an ecofeminism approach. This paper therefore places environmental degradation in the context of tribal land rights and argues that destruction to land amounts to violation of feminine space and identity. The authors trace the construction of feminine space and its relationship with greater ecological consciousness while analyzing Mother Forest and Mayilamma. Though they are all making valuable contributions, such studies remain located within ecofeminism, Adivasi ecology or gender-centered environmental analysis.

This paper, therefore, addresses this lacuna with a framework that reads Mother Forest as an ‘eco-ethics of resistance’ where identity, activism and ecology meet. The broader ethical and decolonial ecological perspective in this paper moves away from an exclusively eco-feminist approach and shows a new interpretive vision of tribal life-writing as a site of moral ecological resistance.

Research Question and Objectives-

The central research question that guides this paper is: How does the autobiography of C.K. Janu use representations of land, identity and activism to enact an eco-ethic of resistance?

These three objectives are looked into in order to answer this.

a) Analyze the ecological worldview of the tribe from the select text.



- b) Analyze ecological injustice and land loss by using environmental justice theory and
- c) To interpret Janu's activism as an eco-ethical resistance.

Ecological Worldview in Mother forest-

“No one knows the forest like we do. She is mother to us. More than a mother because she never abandons us” (Bhaskaran, 2004, p. 5). C.K. Janu's ecological world of the *Mother Forest* depicts and explains that, in the Adivasi community, the forest is treated as a living presence- one that shapes everyday life, identity and belonging for the Adivasi. Rather than objectification or natural resource management, Janu's narrative unravels the relationship between human beings and the environment. This is what William Rueckert describes “Ecocriticism which aims to reconnect nature by finding a common ground between the human and the non- human to show how they co-exist in the same biosphere as an integral part of existence” (Ayanita, 2021, p. 5-6). In *Mother Forest*, such connections are unraveled through early memories of gathering food, learning the routes of the forest, listening to birds and understanding the rhythm of weather and seasons. For the Adivasi community, the forest is not simply a background; it is teacher, guardian and partner in survival. “Nature lay open for little ones to learn from. Time and seasons could be told from the chirping of certain birds. The months could be counted when the leaves fell from the trees. From the darkening clouds descending on the hilltops and the forests we could gauge the direction of the wind. Our lives were so strongly interlinked with nature, the earth and the trees” (Bhaskaran,2004, p.51). Thus, through this ecological worldview, Janu represents the forest as a site of knowledge. Children grow up learning the signs of nature-where edible roots grow, what time to climb for honey, how to find water or how to predict animal movements. What the story depicts is that Adivasi people do not consider themselves something different from nature; they are part of the energy and life of the forest. This completely contests the notion of development in modernity, which usually looks at forests only from the commercial angle. Joseph W. Meeker's '*Comedy of Survival*' also sheds much light on the ecological worldview in *Mother Forest*. According to Meeker, “Ecology is an ancient theme in art and literature, however new it may be as a science. Plants, animals, mountains, seas, and sky have traditionally been represented in literature as a complete system in which human beings find or create their proper places” (Meeker, 1974, p.9). This statement of Meeker's can be seen in the text itself as Janu states about her friend who find her personal space in the forest and observe all the elements of nature. “She knew about the plants needed for snakebites. When we walked through the forest. she could make out the birds from the sound 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” (Bhaskaran, 2004,



p.22). The forest carries their stories, ancestors and traditions. It is this emotional connect that underlines the deeply ecological nature of their worldviews: the well-being of the community depends upon the well-being of the forest. *Mother Forest* can be situated through the ideas of Rueckert and Meeker within the realms of a narrative which expresses ecological awareness in simple real-life terms. Janu's autobiography is nothing but a representation of how the Adivasi view and live with nature. Their worldviews teach respect for the land, trust in the seasons and the need to live in harmony with the environment.

Environmental Injustice and Land loss-

In *Mother Forest*, C.K. Janu explains in detail how environmental injustice shapes every bit of Adivasi life right from the loss of their land. Land is not space to live on for them but the very center of survival, culture and identity. Just the moment this land gets taken away, everything built over so many generations-knowledge, traditions and security-suddenly comes under threat. Janu uses her life to expose the fact that environmental injustice is not just damage to nature; it is about the ways in which people who depend upon the environment, suffer. "The fact that tree after tree was cut down and transported in lorries down the mountains, that our huts and walls that could crumble any moment, that we could not thatch our fallen roofs..." (Bhaskaran, 2004, p.38). The statement falls into the category of what Bretting and Prindeville definition of environmental injustice. "When we refer to environmental injustice, we mean situations where a community's citizenry perceives that the local, state, or tribal government is failing to protect their lives and property from environmental pollution and its associated costs" (Camacho, 1998, p.142). Large pieces of forests are cleared for plantations, private farms or government projects. Newcomers claim ownership over the land while the original inhabitants get pushed aside. Those who have lived with the forest generation after generation are suddenly seen as outsiders on their own lands. This unequal control over the environment lies at the heart of injustice. Those in power decide on how the land is to be used while the Adivasis, who depend on the forest for everything, have no say in these decisions. Janu describes the immediate effects of losing land; hunger, homelessness and uncertainty. "Our problems mostly relate to our work, our lands and our hunger" (Bhaskaran, 2004, p.34). Without access to the resources of the forest, the traditional ways of living slowly started to disappear. They lost firewood, sources of water, medicinal plants and the natural shelter that once protected them. Environmental injustice thus turned into physical suffering as the basic needs of life became hard to achieve. The hills and trees that once gave comfort now stand unreachable behind fences or within private estates. Janu shows that in taking away their land, environmental injustice takes away not just resources but also relationships with nature. The environmentally unjust situation creates deep



social inequality. Those who occupy the land benefit from its natural resources and wealth, while Adivasis become laborers on their own lands. “Our people had turned into mere wage laborers. Mother forest had turned into the Departmental Forest” (Bhaskaran, 2004, p.30). Often, they toil on the same lands where they once stayed under harsh conditions with absolutely no rights whatsoever. Evidence after evidence has shown how environmental and social injustices go hand in glove. The environment becomes a tool in the hands of the powerful to control and exploit the weak. Thus, in *Mother Forest* environmental injustice and loss of land are not separated; rather, these are deeply interlinked experiences shaping the whole life of the community.

Janu’s activism as an Eco-Ethical Resistance-

First, we see what the environmental ethics mean and how the non-ethical behavior of political parties, to the innocent people of Adivasi community and how it forces Janu activism in eco-ethics of resistance. “Environmental ethics consists of the study of normative issues and principles relating to human interactions with the environment and their consequences” (Uttarakhand open university, 2022, p.3). The newcomers of the land use nature for their commercial purpose and the struggle and relation of Adivasi people for their Nature got devastated. “The new migrants divided the land into fragments and used them for different types of agriculture. They began to extract profit, instead of yield, from the land. They called them commercial crops. Paddy fields began to dwindle” (Bhaskaran, 2004, p.30). In *Mother Forest*, C.K. Janu’s activism is not only a political movement but also one of eco-ethical resistance. Her struggle for land rights, survival and dignity grows directly from values learned in the forest-values based on care, responsibility, community and respect for the natural world. “We four humans stay here with a dog and the 15 goats. Devi and Lakshmi go to work. I don’t, nowadays. There is no time for that. I am mostly on the move dealing with some problem or other that our people face” (Bhaskaran, 2004, p.46). In this sense, her resistance takes on an ethical dimension rooted in ecological understanding. Janu’s activism actually begins when she realizes that displacement is not only a social or economic problem but a violation of the moral relationship between her people and the nature which provides food, water, shelter, knowledge and emotional security. When outsiders seize the land, this whole relationship is broken. Janu recognizes that protecting the land is the only way to protect the community and nature. “When transplanted, we lost not only our lands but also the environment in which we existed” (Bhaskaran, 2004, p. 52). Her protests, collective actions and land reclamation movements therefore reflect a deep sense of responsibility- both to the environment and to future generations. This sense of responsibility forms the core of what can be called eco-ethical resistance - resistance driven not by anger alone, but by a moral duty to defend the environment which sustains life. She does not fight for



dominance; she fights for restoration. Janu's resistance becomes a constant reminder that authentic development needs to integrate landscape protection and the rights of people belonging to those landscapes. By insisting on the fact that the forest is a home that has to be respected rather than a resource to be exploited, she has presented an alternative vision of how human beings should live with nature. She uses her voice to protect nature. Telling her story in public gave visibility to damaged landscapes, lost livelihoods and severely broken relationships with nature. The testimony is a certain kind of ecological resistance itself- a remembering of the land and an assertion of its importance. Finally, Janu's activism fully illustrates that resistance is not just a matter of reclaiming physical land but also of defending values that actually accrue from ethical land. She wages her struggle out of love for the forest, a sense of responsibility to her community and in the belief that humans must learn to live respectfully with nature. That way, activism emerges as eco-ethical resistance- a resistance that protects human beings and nature, born out of the conviction that justice can't be achieved without ecological care.

Methodology-

The approach pursued in the paper is qualitative textual analysis, combining ecocritical, ecological and environmental injustice perspectives on Mother Forest. Close reading of the texts therefore constitutes the backbone of the analysis; this kind of approach thus creates an opportunity for paying special attention to how C.K. Janu describes the life of the forest, land loss, displacement and activism. Such a perspective, at the same time, conjures and interprets major themes of an ecological worldview, environmental injustice, and resistance. Ecocriticism, therefore, provides the main critical framework from which both Adivasis as a community and their environment can be defined. This reading is further supported by the discourses raised in Joseph Meeker's work entitled *The Comedy of Survival* that insist that literature reflects human survival and ecological balance. These discourses facilitate the reading of Janu's narrative as one which takes shape from survival and moral responsibilities deeply linked to the land. It draws on discussions in Camacho's work, *Environmental Injustice, Political Struggles*, to attempt to understand the political dimensions of land loss and set the community experience within larger patterns of environmental inequality. Notions of Environmental Ethics and Philosophy at Uttarakhand Open University also help inform the reading of Janu's activism as being morally and ecologically anchored. Combined, these methods have enabled the research to locate Mother Forest as an intersection text in terms of environmental experience, cultural identity and ethical resistance.

**Relevance-**

Hence, the contemporary relevance of this paper lies in attempting to connect tribal literature with environmental ethics and resistance narratives. Most tribal autobiographies are read as socio-political documents, while reading them through eco-ethics foregrounds indigenous ecological knowledge as a site of resistance. Such an approach moves beyond conventional ecocritical readings of their work by underscoring ethical, responsibility and justice concepts fundamental to tribal environmental thought yet overlooked in mainstream scholarship. The paper conceptualizes the narrative as an ‘eco-ethics of resistance’ and brings into sharp focus how Janu’s experience documents the rupture not only in livelihood but in the moral relationship of the community with the land. Such a reading contributes to the emerging conversations on environmental injustice, indigenous rights and life-writing while underlining the need to integrate the tribal ecological perspectives into global debates on sustainability, environmental politics and decolonial environmental humanities.

Conclusion-

This paper has focused on *Mother Forest* as a narrative within which ecological experience, environmental injustice and ethical resistance join to build personal memory and the collective struggle. Drawing on an ecocritical approach that emanates from discourses of literary ecology and environmental justice, it proves that Janu’s life story far exceeds the confines of individual biography. It becomes a chronicle of how the Adivasi worldview draws its basis from a respectful, balanced association with the forest wherein land is understood in terms of home, heritage and moral responsibility. Her descriptions of her childhood in the forest depict a mode of subsistence predicated upon interdependence, care and ecological awareness. It has been seen from the discussion that environmental injustice and land loss disrupt physical survival, cultural identity, emotional security and traditional knowledge. The story of Janu epitomizes the fact that loss of land amounts to the loss of access to natural resources, dignity and continuity of community life. This is not an accident but a consequence of unjust power relations that decide who shall have control over the environment and who shall suffer due to environmental loss. Finally, the research looked at how Janu’s activism works as a mode of eco-ethical resistance-the protests, the movements of land reclamation and collective organizing are one way in which Janu reflects ethical commitments to protection for her community and ecology that nourish them. It is in this manner also that the resistance becomes an ethical response to ecological harm in *Mother Forest* and the text thus constitutes a very valuable contribution toward understanding how identity, ecology and justice interlink in the context of tribal life-writing.



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