

ADIVASI WOMEN AND THEIR RELATIONSHIP WITH NATURE: AN ANALYSIS OF *MOTHER FOREST* BY C.K. JANU

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ABSTRACT

This paper critically evaluates the relationship between Adivasi women and nature as depicted in Mother Forest: The Unfinished Story of C.K. Janu, the memoir of C.K. Janu, a prominent Adivasi leader and activist from Kerala, India. The text provides a nuanced exploration of Janu's lived experiences as an Adivasi woman, offering insights into the broader socio-political struggles of indigenous communities in securing rights to land, resources, and cultural heritage. Framed within an ecofeminist perspective, this study investigates the depiction of Adivasi women as stewards of the forest, emphasizing their profound, symbiotic relationship with the natural environment, which transcends mere economic considerations. This analysis underscores the critical intersections between gender, indigeneity, and ecology, arguing that the preservation of Adivasi cultural identity and environmental sustainability are mutually dependent. The paper further calls for the recognition of indigenous ecological knowledge and the active inclusion of Adivasi women in environmental justice movements.

Keywords: Adivasi Women, Ecofeminism, Indigenous Rights, Environmental Degradation, Land Dispossession.

Introduction

C.K. Janu, a prominent Adivasi leader, and activist has long been recognised for her relentless efforts in advocating for the land rights of Indigenous communities in Kerala, India. Her leadership in the struggle for Adivasi land reclamation has made her a powerful voice for the marginalised, particularly Adivasi women, whose lives and identities are deeply intertwined with the forest and nature. Janu's autobiographical work *Mother Forest (Ammayude Aadu)* brings to light the intimate relationship between Adivasi communities and their natural surroundings, especially how women play a crucial role in maintaining and protecting this bond. As Janu writes, "The forest was not merely a place to live but our mother, nurturing us in every way" (*Mother Forest* 45), underscoring the forest's role not only as a source of sustenance but also as a symbol of cultural identity and spiritual connection for the Adivasi people.

The narrative of *Mother Forest* delves deeply into themes of Adivasi identity, land, and environment, portraying nature as central to the community's survival. Janu uses her personal story to highlight broader issues faced by indigenous people in India, focusing on the impact of environmental

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degradation, displacement, and cultural erasure. In particular, the novel reflects on the connection between Adivasi women and the land, positioning them as stewards of nature, both physically and symbolically. This is vividly captured when Janu states, "The trees were our ancestors, and we belonged to them, just as they belonged to us" (*Mother Forest* 67), showing the profound spiritual and ancestral ties the Adivasi women have with their environment.

The purpose of this research is to explore how Adivasi women, through Janu's narrative, relate to nature, land, and the forest as vital parts of their cultural and social identity. The novel not only emphasises the importance of nature in their everyday lives but also portrays the forest as a metaphor for Adivasi culture's strength, resilience, and continuity. Janu's assertion, "We did not own the land, but the land owned us" (*Mother Forest* 89), captures the essence of this relationship, one that goes beyond material possession to represent a profound connection between people and the environment.

Adivasi communities in India, often referred to as the country's indigenous or tribal populations, have historically maintained a deep connection with the land, particularly the forests that surround their villages. These communities, spread across various regions of India, view the forest not just as a source of livelihood but as an integral part of their cultural and spiritual lives. For centuries, Adivasi people have depended on forests for food, shelter, and medicine, developing an intricate understanding of the natural world. This connection to the forest is especially significant for Adivasi women, who have traditionally been the primary gatherers of food, medicinal plants, and other resources, ensuring the survival of their families and communities. As C.K. Janu notes in *Mother Forest*, "The forest was the source of life for us, and we knew every tree, every plant as we knew our own family" (Janu *Mother Forest* 52). This intimate bond between Adivasi women and nature is evident in their daily lives and is central to their identity.

The role of women in Adivasi communities extends beyond gathering resources; they are often seen as the keepers of ecological knowledge and the stewards of natural resources. In many ways, Adivasi women serve as the custodians of the forest, ensuring its preservation for future generations. They are instrumental in maintaining the balance between human needs and environmental sustainability. Janu's work vividly portrays this connection, as she writes, "We took from the forest only what we needed, always mindful of giving back in ways we could" (Janu *Mother Forest* 63). This sense of responsibility and reciprocity is a key aspect of the Adivasi relationship with nature, one that is passed down through generations, particularly among women.

C.K. Janu's personal story is one of resilience and activism. Born into an Adivasi family, she experienced firsthand the struggles of displacement and exploitation faced by indigenous communities. Her involvement in the land rights movement was driven by the desire to reclaim the forest land that had been taken from the Adivasi people by the government and private enterprises. Janu's activism is a continuation of the long-standing tradition of Adivasi resistance against external forces that seek to exploit their land and resources. In *Mother Forest*, she poignantly reflects on the loss of her people's ancestral land, stating, "Our land was taken from us, and with it, they tried to take our identity, our history, and our future" (Janu *Mother Forest* 78). Her fight for land rights is not just a struggle for physical space but for the preservation of Adivasi culture and their symbiotic relationship with the forest.

In *Mother Forest*, C.K. Janu employs a personal narrative structure that not only tells her own story but also serves as a reflection of the larger issues faced by the Adivasi community. Through her personal experiences, Janu gives voice to the collective struggles of Adivasi people, particularly the challenges they face in preserving their land, identity, and culture. By intertwining her journey with that of her community, Janu illustrates how individual and collective identities are deeply linked. As she writes, "The forest was not merely a place to live but our mother, nurturing us in every way" (Janu, *Mother Forest* 45). This statement highlights the forest's symbolic role as both a physical and spiritual provider, a nurturing force that sustains the community.

The symbolism of nature, especially the forest, is a recurring theme throughout the narrative. Janu portrays the forest as far more than a physical space—it is central to the Adivasi identity, culture, and spirituality. For Adivasi women in particular, the forest represents life, ancestry, and continuity. Janu emphasises this symbolic connection when she writes, "The trees were our ancestors, and we belonged to them, just as they belonged to us" (Janu, *Mother Forest* 67). This line underscores the deep-rooted sense of belonging that Adivasi women feel toward the natural world, where the forest is seen as a living entity, integral to their existence and cultural heritage. The bond between Adivasi women and the forest is not only emotional but also ancestral, forming a cyclical relationship of mutual dependence and respect.

A central theme in *Mother Forest* is the role of women in protecting and preserving nature. Janu portrays Adivasi women as the primary caretakers of the forest, responsible for sustaining their families and community through their intimate knowledge of the environment. These women are depicted as not only resource gatherers but also as custodians of ecological wisdom, ensuring that the balance between human needs and nature is maintained. Janu's portrayal of women as preservers of nature reflects their vital role in maintaining both ecological and cultural sustainability. As she writes, "We took from the forest only what we needed, always mindful of giving back in ways we could" (Janu, *Mother Forest* 63). This practice of reciprocity, rooted in respect for nature, is a key principle in the lives of Adivasi women, highlighting their role in protecting and nurturing the environment for future generations.

C.K. Janu's *Mother Forest* embodies the intersection of Ecofeminism and the struggle for land rights among Adivasi women. Ecofeminism, which links the exploitation of women and nature to patriarchal structures, finds a powerful expression in the lived experiences of Adivasi women who face the dual oppression of environmental destruction and marginalization. Janu's narrative brings to the forefront how the struggles for gender equality, land rights, and environmental preservation are interconnected for Adivasi women. The forest is not merely a source of sustenance for these women but a space of identity, heritage, and survival. In highlighting this connection, Janu aligns her story with Ecofeminist perspectives, showing that the fight for environmental justice is also a fight for women's rights. The land, deeply rooted in their cultural and spiritual existence, is essential to their sense of self, as Janu poignantly states: "We own the land, but the land owned us" (Janu, *Mother Forest* 89).

Janu's work illustrates how environmental degradation caused by external forces—such as deforestation, industrialization, and government interventions—disrupts the lives of Adivasi women, stripping them of their traditional livelihood and cultural practices. This degradation disproportionately affects Adivasi women, who rely on the forest for gathering food, herbs, and other resources, essential not only for sustenance but also for maintaining the social fabric of their community. In *Mother Forest*, Janu emphasizes that the destruction of the forest is not just an environmental issue but a direct attack on the Adivasi way of life. She writes, "Our forests were taken away, not by natural disaster, but by the greed of those who never understood its value" (Janu, *Mother Forest* 102). This line underscores the disconnect between the exploitative forces and the Adivasi people's deep respect for the environment.

Furthermore, the book sheds light on how the loss of land and forest impacts the cultural practices and identities of Adivasi women. By destroying their connection to the land, these external forces aim to erase their history and cultural knowledge. The narrative powerfully conveys that land is not merely a physical entity, but a custodian of Adivasi heritage and survival. Janu's assertion, "We did not own the land, but the land owned us" (Janu, *Mother Forest* 89), reflects the profound attachment Adivasi women have to their land—an attachment that goes beyond material ownership to encompass spiritual and cultural belonging. The degradation of the environment thus becomes not only a matter of ecological concern but a feminist issue, as it disproportionately impacts the women who are the primary custodians of both land and culture.

In *Mother Forest*, C.K. Janu portrays Adivasi women not as passive victims of ecological exploitation, but as active resisters who challenge the forces that seek to exploit their land and resources. Throughout the narrative, Janu emphasizes the strength and resilience of Adivasi women, who fight not only to preserve their environment but also to safeguard their cultural identity and way of life. The forest, in this context, becomes a symbol of resistance, with Adivasi women standing at the forefront of the battle against external forces, including government policies and corporate interests, that aim to exploit their natural surroundings. Janu's portrayal of these women highlights their role as defenders of the environment, deeply connected to the land that sustains them. As she asserts, "Our forests are not for sale, they are the source of our life, our breath" (Janu, *Mother Forest* 122), underscoring the centrality of the forest to the Adivasi community's existence and survival.

The fight for land in *Mother Forest* is framed as a fight for identity, survival, and cultural continuity. Janu's narrative presents the Adivasi struggle for land as an ongoing battle to preserve their cultural heritage and protect their future generations. The forest is more than just a physical space—it is a repository of Adivasi knowledge, traditions, and spirituality. By resisting the encroachment of external forces, Adivasi women are defending not just their homes but the very fabric of their cultural identity. Janu's work captures this sense of urgency and determination, showing that for the Adivasi people, the land is inseparable from their cultural survival. As she eloquently states, "Without our land, we are lost; it is not just a loss of property, but the loss of who we are" (Janu, *Mother Forest* 110). The struggle for land reclamation thus becomes a form of cultural reclamation, with Adivasi women leading the charge. Janu's

depiction of Adivasi women as active resisters is a powerful statement against the narrative of victimhood often imposed on marginalized communities. Through their resilience and determination, these women reclaim their agency, asserting their right to protect their environment and preserve their cultural identity. The fight for land is framed as a matter of survival, where losing the forest would mean losing their history, traditions, and future. Janu's assertion that "Our forests are not for sale" (Janu, *Mother Forest* 122) is a declaration of defiance, representing the collective voice of Adivasi women who refuse to be displaced or silenced in the face of exploitation.

Conclusion

Mother Forest serves as a powerful narrative that illustrates the deep and enduring relationship between Adivasi women and nature. C.K. Janu's account not only highlights the spiritual and cultural significance of the forest to the Adivasi community but also positions women as central figures in the preservation of both the environment and their cultural heritage. Through vivid personal and collective experiences, Janu captures the interconnectedness of land, identity, and survival, portraying Adivasi women as active resisters against the exploitation of their natural resources. The forest is not merely a backdrop in their lives, but an integral part of who they are, as evidenced by statements like, "Our forests are not for sale, they are the source of our life, our breath" (Janu, *Mother Forest* 122).

The themes explored in *Mother Forest* remain highly relevant in contemporary environmental and feminist discourses. The intersection of Ecofeminism and environmental justice is increasingly recognised as critical in addressing the challenges faced by marginalised communities worldwide, particularly indigenous women who are often at the forefront of environmental struggles. Janu's narrative resonates with global movements that call for the protection of indigenous lands and the empowerment of women in ecological resistance. The book also raises important questions about the long-term impact of environmental degradation on cultural continuity and the importance of land rights in preserving indigenous identities.

For future research, *Mother Forest* opens the door to deeper explorations into Adivasi literature and the broader themes of environmental justice. Further studies could focus on how other indigenous narratives similarly highlight the role of women in environmental conservation, or how traditional ecological knowledge is being threatened by modern developmental policies. Additionally, comparative studies between Adivasi experiences in India and those of indigenous communities in other parts of the world could shed light on the global significance of land struggles and the role of women in these movements.

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