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S. T. HINDU COLLEGE, NAGERCOIL-2, Tamilnadu, India



Towards Subaltern Modernity: Geo-politics in the Life-narrative of C.K. Janu

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Abstract

The paper attempts to contribute to the debate on modernity from the perspective of resisting subaltern subjects, generating transformative effects of universal relevance. Choosing one's life for narrative elaboration has often been seen as a distinctive marker of modernity. This is empirically informed by the narrative of C.K. Janu. The rallying cry of resistance as reflected through her life narrative *Mother Forest: The Unfinished Story of C.K. Janu* has shaped the notion of knowledge as emancipation in a regional context, but with a universal relevance. *Mother Forest: The Unfinished Story of C. K. Janu* is a brave project to revive a border culture. It can also be read as a counter-hegemonic practice, a resistance and a unique struggle against social exclusion. The narrative of C K Janu figures out as a resistance against social exclusion foisted on the sidelined subjects, interpreting subalternity in context. It provides a critique of the essentialist underpinnings of subalternity foregrounding the heterogeneity of the subaltern subjects in the process. This life-narrative expresses a new subaltern modernity unraveling the duplicity of our institutionalized economy and polity.

Key-words: Life-narrative, subaltern modernity, resistance, emancipation

While the imperial and traditional caste hegemonic forms were the targets of subaltern resistance during colonialism, it was the state-led, capital-driven developmentalism that became the target of attack in post-colonial Kerala. The democratic status of the country makes it possible for people to challenge older hierarchical pyramids of power and dominance. Yet the rules of certain cultural codes in everyday life pertaining to authority and power are far from



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being liberal. The Life narrative of C.K. Janu turns out to be a distinctive marker of modernity in post-colonial Kerala. The political-ecological protest led by this woman warrior with a massive support of a tribal community contributes to the notion of a subaltern modernity and even a tribal republic or what Santos calls the “sociology of emergences” (47).

Far from depicting individual interiorities as confessional and introspective exercise, the life-narrative of C. K. Janu as told to artist Bhaskaran, become an exercise of resolute public utterances. No activity is carried out in hermetic solitude without outer gestures of extrospection in this life narrative. The known academician Udayakumar observes:

Instead of seeing the autobiographical act as a movement from the inner domain to the outer, we may see it as located from the outset in a public, exhibitionary space. This means shifting our attention from introspection to the outer, to gestures of extrospection A focus on exteriority may help us see autobiographical utterances as performances. . . . We need to consider the inner world itself as inscribed on the surface of things, as produced through actions and utterances in a field of mutual exposure and unevenly shared visibility. (20-21)

As a vanguard of an alternative politics, C,K, Janu attempts to present a geo-politics as relevant to modern India. Janu’s life-narrative - *Mother Forest: The Unfinished Story of C.K. Janu* is not a mere self-explicating tale, rather it turns out to be an intricate platform of heterogeneous, political as well as cultural performance. To carve a little space for her means voicing boldly and breaking all the oppressive shackles around her. Voicing her tyrannical experiences turns out to be a compulsive exercise in counter-hegemonic discourse.

C. K. Janu’s *Mother Forest* is a case of cultural resistance juxtaposing the tribal culture and the mainstream culture. And it is in this cultural difference, to be more precise, in this cultural uniqueness, lays the tribal identity. In an interview with her translator Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak, Mahaswetha Devi makes a pertinent observation, “The tribals and the mainstream have always been parallel. There has never been a meeting point. The mainstream simply does not understand the parallel”(x).

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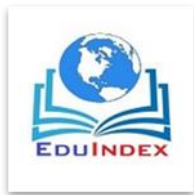


In their course of cultural resistance, the tribals resort to a prospective strategy of cultural safeguarding and cultural celebration through articulation. M. Dasan says in his “Dialoguing with (Tribal) Text”: “Tribal literature of India in various oral traditions and regional languages do reflect the specific experience of tribal people, their world view and spirituality. Their oral and written literatures tell the stories of exploitation, denial of land rights, human rights and displacement. In short, they narrate what it means to be a tribal” (39).

Mother Forest is an account of the vicissitudes of the *adiyar* community life. She recalls the communal strength of the tribals and how the tribal life was caught up in poverty and misery when they were denied access to the nutritional resources of the forest produce. From an ordinary member of a Kerala Karshaka Thozhilai Union (Agricultural Workers’ Union) she grows into a tribal activist waging hard struggles against the State, the power structure, for the land rights of the tribals. Janu renders an extremely passionate account of a struggle to retrieve the lands of which they were dispossessed. As Prof. Dasan rightly points out, “The aboriginal writings document the continuing struggle against internal colonization” (39). The tribals are relegated to the condition of ‘outcastes’ as they are outside the customary Hindu Varna caste hierarchy.

Forest land and the community are entwined in the narrative body closely. Nature has served a habitat and calming presence for them and they could feel secure on the backdrop of it: “When it grew really dark everyone would gather in the courtyard. We would sit for hours listening to what the forest mumbled”(8). The practice of cultural ‘othering’ forces the tribal community to identify an urban civilian outside their community as a foreigner.

The blank notions of development and welfare proved simple explanations for the expulsion of tribals from their natural dwelling. Driven out from their own land, they are compelled to work like slaves in the plantations of *jenmi* only to be ill-treated as outcastes and untouchables: “In those days we were afraid of almost everything. The backs of our people seem to be so bent because they have been terrified of so many things for generations. When our people speak they don’t raise their eyes and that must be because they are so scared” (13).



The duplicity and the emptiness of the literacy programmes and the welfare programmes meant for the welfare of the tribals are also exposed: “It was when I was sixteen or seventeen that the literacy people came to Chekkot. A girl belonging to the ‘warrier’ caste handled it the ‘warrier’ girl would come for two days and then disappear for days. It was like recording something in her book and then claiming payment for it, not like any real intention to teach our people how to write”(20).

The naive tribals joined the party only to realize with disappointment that they are sheer vote banks. Their party membership does not improve their earnings nor does it emancipate them from their exploited status. The tribal culture and tribal economy are being constantly monitored and exploited by the mainstream trespassers. Bipin Chandra makes a very significant observation in *India’s Struggle for Independence*, “These middle men were the chief instruments in bringing the tribal people within the vortex of the colonial economy and exploitation”(42). The recent fatal episodes with the tribal youth named Madhu, prove that even today the tribals cannot live without fear, without tension and without intimidation.

C.K. Janu’s activism to reclaim the alienated tribal land led to many intense forms of struggles which led them to build-huts agitations and the subsequent historical *Muthanga* struggle. In January 2003, the Adivasi Gothramahasabha under the guidance of Janu forcefully took ownership of forest areas in Muthanga in Wayanad district which triggered the authorities to resort to violence. Janu rationalizes the so-called act of violation:

All our struggles have been struggles to establish the ownership rights of the real owners of this land for the right to live on it. It is true that civil society’s traditions and processes relating to land ownership are quite different from the traditions related to the needs of our community. That’s why, for the sake of our sheer existence on this land we are forced to struggle against all centres of power. (55)

Mother Forest: The Unfinished Story of C. K. Janu is a brave project to revive a border culture. It can also be read as a counter-hegemonic practice, a resistance and a unique struggle against social exclusion. The narrative of C K Janu figures out as a resistance against social

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exclusion foisted on the sidelined subjects, interpreting subalternity in context. It provides a critique of the essentialist underpinnings of subalternity foregrounding the heterogeneity of the subaltern subjects in the process. This life-narrative expresses a new subaltern modernity unraveling the duplicity of our institutionalized economy and polity.

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