

**MODERNITY AND GENDER NEGOTIATIONS: C.K. JANU'S *MOTHER FOREST* IN KERALA FEMINIST ICONOGRAPHY**

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The dialogue on gender and modernity in Kerala has been delegated in the public and academic sphere since the last decades of the twentieth century vis-a-vis its engagements and responses to the social geopolitics. The iconography of the 'Feminazis', 'Feminichis' and related jargons has seeped through the collective unconscious of the people in the narrative of Kerala, has come to the fore from a deliberation or the lack thereof of navigating the politics and potentials of a movement as of the nature of Feminism. The state has been a sustained witness to a series of ecriture feminine, in the form of generic outlets as life writings in prose and poetry, novels, short stories and social commentary that modified and re-codified its narrative on women and the politics of their existence. From these, the paper would attempt to read and analyse social activist C.K. Janu's seminal autobiography *Mother Forest* as a foray into the notion of indigenous feminist iconography and its complicated threads of negotiation with the ideas of modernity and gender roles in the public sphere. While doing so, it would also attempt to place the narrative and its writer in the larger discourse of feminism in the state across time.

The study on language as a powerful mediator of changing paradigmatic syndications in the politics of gender had emerged in the long 1970s with scholars by the likes of Kate Millet, Elaine Showalter, Sandra Gilbert, Helen Cixous, Susan Gubar, Toril Moi among others. While these scholars have been instrumental in opening up the platitudes of a literature hidden and manipulated by the restrictive codes of patriarchy, conventions and othering, this has initiated a deliberation on the articulation of a gynocentric (Showalter) narrative amidst the established structures of phallogocentrism (Derrida). Consequently, generations of gaps in the historiography of women and their narratives were unearthed and subjected to scrutiny with a serious critical interest, particularly in Europe. However, Betty Friedan's notion of 'feminine mystique', Alice Walker's 'Womanism' and the critique of Eurocentric White feminism directed the necessity of diverse engagements with different parameters in feminism as a social movement for women across the world, including the identification, articulation and dispersion of pro-women literatures.

As the waves of feminist movements and empowerment narratives helmed a favourable negotiation in suffrage in as early as 1935 and later through the aforementioned deliberations, there arose a consistent influence and cogitation on women's identity and their narrative of the selves in the India of 19<sup>th</sup> and 20<sup>th</sup> centuries. Remarkable activists streamlined the political leadership and catered to generating a sort of mobilising power and sisterhood among the women then, including Annie Besant, Margaret Noble etc. While upper caste Hindu leaders like Sarojini Naidu and Vijayalakshmi Pandit attained a sustained visibility in the highly problematic hierarchical historiography, Adivasi and other minority women clusters failed to be etched in the written archives of the country. They were thrice removed from their self by means of colonists, the upper castes and patriarchal structures within their community, but Jhalkaribai, Kuyili, Uda Devi, Sabitri Dev, Putalimaya Devi Poddar have had to fight the repression and bigotries of not only these then, but subsequent generations in ink as well, to place themselves in the currency of not only Dalit epistemology but also in the larger structure of metanarrative.

In Kerala, the initiations of modernity and proliferations of feminist ideals could be traced back to the early decades of the nineteenth century with interjections of rebellions against

untouchability and social evils. The Kerala Nadar women's movement in a fight for claim and rights over the sartorial orientations of the physical selves called the Channar Revolt (1813-1859) was foremost in the salient directive towards the possibilities of vocalising the self. But does modernity articulate from the universal awareness of the individual as spaced not in a vacuum but the psychosocial bodypolitics of parametric fragments or transcending the awareness to a mass struggle? How does it fare in Kerala among Adivasi women? The following reasons have been succinctly presented as catalysts in the state:

The introduction of colonial education, the increase in printing presses and the proliferation of books and the creation of a dynamic public sphere, the emergence of a new English educated middle class all contributed to the creation of modernity in Kerala. However, an understanding of modernity in Kerala resists fixed genealogies (of the region), connects diverse fragments and also creates ruptures, breaks and discontinuities (Bose and Varughese 12).

The "dynamic public sphere" however failed to address the questions of women's progress and many writers took up these failures in their books as is the case with *Agnisakshi* by Lalithambika Antharjanam and *Premabhajanam* by K. Saraswathi Amma. Though sites from a hierarchical upper class milieu, it dares to point out the fissures that modernity or rather masculine definitions of modernity depraves women. Women of all caste, class and regional affiliations, who realised the power of mobilisations, were left to fret in the domestic and caste space charted out by the reformed men of the century. However, the meagre reforms of gender which succeeded the social reformation were meant for the upper caste women, as J. Devika says. The premier novel in Malayalam *Indulekha* by O. Chandumenon argues for educating the Malayali women but staunchly places her within the caste system by means of her social dialogues and iconography. Drawing from Sangari and Vaid, the literature especially Malayalam women's magazines that came out of the causes of modernity was rather "the recasting of women into companionate marital relationships and attendant familial duties" (20). While the notion of modernity transcribed to somewhat a movement against ills of the tradition in the state, the tradition or cultural definitions was marked by the definitions vis-a-vis the upper Nair-Namboodiri castes. Therefore there were sans visibility groups of women who barely existed in the system of modernity even in the twentieth century. The lack of inclusivity and equality in the access to education, property, economy and therefore the stabilisations of the nation-state, made modernity a problematic surface to navigate for the Dalit women in the margins.

It was the disillusionment with the land reform movements in the wake of millennium that brought the iron-lady of Muthanga at the forefront of the Dalit feminist iconography. Her Kudil Ketti Samaram (Sit-in Strike) and the subsequent rebellion in the organised leadership of Adivasi Gothra Mahasabha has been instrumental in dispersal of public sphere engagements on Adivasi rights on productive land and bring visibility to their cultural consciousness which was submerged under the qualms of bureaucratic reigns for urbanmodernity. Both Janu and the text have been subject to scrutiny by scholars regional, national and the international in Malayalam and English. Across time there has arguments been placed on the narrative of the self and the performative self. While Pramod K Nayar, identifies and Janu's self in the narrative of her community, Rakesh Ramamoorthy points to the existence of the exotic and the modern as a performative engagement amidst the vocabulary of the text. However the paper argues that she is an autoethnographic self as she reflects and narrates a feminist modernity that lies in community of sisterhood for change and empowerment. In the aforementioned sentence, the semantics of phrases used from self to feminist to modernity to empowerment invokes divergence to the metanarrative of the same in the state.

C.K. Janu was born to the Adiya, an indigenous community from Wayanad, Kerala. Her autobiographical narrative though mediated by author Bhaskaran and translator Shanker is a

seminal draft on her community and her resistance since the 1970s from her birth. Born as an Adiya, her narrative of the self carries with it the ethnography of the group and their cultural imaginations and codes. The text presents a transformative lucid in the movement from part one of her childhood tribulations to part two of growth of political consciousness. Struggling from the marginalisation, culturally exhumed to be primitive and ordained to slave at the garbs of the conventionally hierarchical high and the caste conscious modern, Janu's childhood was spent between being a maid and a daily wage labourer earning meagre amount in a burgeoning economy. Deprived of their own lands in the name of building the modern nation and its global infrastructure tagged economic liberalisation, the adivasis in India including Janu have seen a perpetual conflict with the dialogue of the "mainstream India" (Collu, 1999). Her usage of informal oral rhetoric (mediated not muted) and strong identification with 'we' instead of 'I' which collates into her autoethnographic self holds a history that has been necessary to be retrieved for the sake of the feminist movement as well as discussing the ambivalence of modernities in the state.

The rhetoric of modernity and feminism during the course of the text in the state was at a point of awareness and paradigm shift in the sense that an attempt was made to integrate but not assimilate, women of marginalised castes to the dialogue of gender and development. With the presence of people like Sara Joseph and Ajitha, there also featured a politically intense deliberation on the sexuality, gender and grievances of these women. Ajitha's Anweshi and Sara's Manushi were societies helping mobilise the women and syncopating their solidarity with all women under duress. Sara Joseph has also been credited with ushering an era of 'pennezhutu' (womens' writing), a series of critical ecriture feminine in Kerala. As Maya Subrahmaniam points out this was a archive in time when:

The Indian Association for Women's National Conference in 1984 in Trivandrum also brought women together and facilitated group activities. However, unlike the women's groups in the large North Indian cities, which were primarily, composed of academics at universities and colleges, feminist activists in Kerala included journalists, teachers, lawyers, doctors and others. There were few working-class women who were in unorganized or daily-wage sectors in the movement, since they thought the trade unions took care of them properly. (4)

While Janu was invisible in the pantheon of who were feminists then, her feminism and political activism took shape under the need to fight for land reforms. She under the aegis of the Left which was calling for equity in land distribution and access in the economy, took up a strike for 48 days in front of the Secretariat in Trivandrum demanding that land that was taken away from them in the name of model of development and destroyed with monoculture be redistributed for them to safeguard and sustain. Is Janu a Feminist? The tribal woman and her vocabulary of empowerment depart from the mainstream feminist agenda in the sense of what Jeffrey Rubin addresses as "actions involving consciousness, collective action, and direct challenges to structures of power" (245). While this might seem reductionary, Sangeetha Verma believes that this collective action for the indigenous woman stems from "not abstract ideas of change but collective knowledge derived from the lived experiences of their community" (223). As the mainstream feminism which focused on the nuances of furthering the promises of colonial modernity for the female gender in the state was based on rebelling the flawed traditions, the feminism of the indigenous women is deeply entrenched in her community and its progress. That being said, as modernity inculcated the notion of identity of individual rather than the community, condemned caste consciousness and discriminations, rose up against communalism, the Indian notion of modernity and its "imagination has never been cut off from what existed earlier" (Chakrabarty 21). In Janu's case, the tirade against the mainstream Kerala modernity is meted out with her indigenous modernity which "is secular and inclusive of all, the living, the nonliving, and the earth herself" (Verma 223). Janu's *Mother Forest* by lieu of its title itself has



positioned and placed itself in a critical terminology on their community and its claims to the forest land. While most of the mainstream feminists as seen belonged to a literate urban modernity, Janu was illiterate until she took part in a state literacy campaign. The question of access to realm of education did not however deter her from stating and charting out her feminism and modernity based on the notions of sisterhood and resilience that was barely brought into the consciousness of women in the state by societies and social activists, but already existed as a sense of community and collective action in Janu:

Unity in everything originates from our women. They have something in common that shelters us from meaninglessly adopting the ways of civil society. They have enough resilience in them to stand for what they feel is right even though they may have to suffer a lot for it. It is among our women that our traditions and the way we dress live on even now. Theirs is a resolve that is hardened by the wind and the rain of the forest in the face of other difficulties. (Janu and Bhaskaran 53)

Not only is she conscious of the rationality behind the sisterhood but also considers it a mode of resistance which incorporates the dissent against subjection to poverty, social isolation, environmental destruction and caste discrimination. As mentioned, Janu's usage of the term "*nammal*" (We) in reference to herself throughout the narrative rather than 'I' also therefore argues for an assertion of an autonomy for the community, the individual and the forest amidst the mainstream social movements. Scholars of indigenous feminism have time and again deliberated about the significance of oral literature in protest and identity assertions. Janu's oral expressions of her life story also engage a synergy with the identity and the native language against appropriations. While the permission to a translation might be seen from the mediation, however, with the difficulties in the same, it is Janu's narrative that is subverting and pointing out the insufficiencies of the "rotten" dominant language to accommodate their strong heritage and sisterhood (Janu and Bhaskaran 34).

The text posits a strong rational sisterhood and bonding that nurtures and rebels. Her community featured women who resisted the sustained invasion of civil society but never romanticised few of the customs of their past. Though Janu has manifold complaints against the abuse of "tribal innocence" especially of women, she reiterates that they fight the abuse without relegating the victims to isolation, there are no taboos in being "single, widowed or abandoned" (Janu and Bhaskaran 67). While the colonial modernity and urban modernity purported by Kerala model of development has been protesting against these taboos in the mainstream, such things did not exist in Janu's communal consciousness. Her modernity is dynamic in her political and vocal questioning of systemic oppression, while calling for sustainable progress of the cultural heritage and the ecological balance of the land. It also asserts her definitive cultural presence within the state while not being assimilated to the complex homogeneity of the mainstream. Janu's recollection of a bitter incident of children especially girls separated from family to be 'civilised' resonates a deep resentment in their transgressions. Her protest of the same would then witness her locating and transgressing by herself a space of significance and a rational democratic infiltration of the mainstream where neither she nor her community was attributed to "modernity". As 'modern' men and women fought through the discriminative conventional traps of religion, Janu on the other hand has seen no "fair fat gods or goddesses" (40) but rather lived with a strong sense of ancestral and ecological gratitude. Further, her modern trait of rationality is definitive in her argument for an evolution of her community in the new social movements and milieu complemented by equity and respect for each other.

She also thwarts the notion of a modernity set in its phallocentrism and masculine tangentials. For her, the women she has seen and grown up with within her indigenous group have been more responsible and prone to practical life than men who waste away much mostly in chasing after the encroachments of the civil society. Her vehemence with their changing lifestyle

of consumption in alcohol and tobacco is seen throughout the text. Janu argues and reiterates favouring women as power central to their community structures that,

Women always take up more responsibility than men. This is so in other communities too. Women go to work in the fields. Digging, sowing, preparing the fields and any kind of work on land. Also, taking care of the little ones in the hut ...Our community can surely grow only through the togetherness of our women (46-47).

In Kerala of the twentieth century, too, is one of intense loss of productive and cultural resources on the one hand, and reduction to a governmental category to be supervised and managed by the state on the other—within the framework of a certain 'bureaucratic modernity'.

In conclusion, the text and its concerns is and has been historiographically significant in that it brings to the fore a story of a community and a feminist who fought a resistance against the pernicious effects of colonial modernity. She in turn attempts to narrate and situate a rationale of a feminism based on existing sisterhood within her community. She also directs the facts that Adiya women are more rationally modern than men for they have more individuality and perseverance in resistance. Therefore Janu's narrative been instrumental in initiating a dialogue in state on the Adiya community and the adivasis in general, from a critically nuanced perspective especially on gender and modernity, as the text arises from the very existence of self, at interjunction of personal, political and social, than a third person observer narrative filtered in biases. Seventeen years down the lane, though Janu is still strongly vocal about the tribal grievances, her conflict with both Left and Right wings has downplayed her visibility in the mainstream. But the text speaks of a political transgression and defining moments of indigenous modernity that has shifted the episteme on adivasis and the women in the state and by means of the translations, national and global.

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