

The Tribal Voice in Environmental Resistance: An Ecocritical Study of the Works of Jacinta Kerketta and Hansda Sowvendra Shekhar

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Abstract: *The unique identity of the Indigenous communities of India, who have close intimacy with nature is now under threat because of environmental degradation and due to the loss of land, forests, rivers, hills, minerals and other resources. The communities are already marginalized in every domain of society - social, cultural, economic and political, facing injustice, exploitation, oppression in the name of 'progress and development' executed by the state machinery. This situation is voiced amply in the works of writers such as Jacinta Kerketta and Hansda Sowvendra Shekhar who try to expose it very vividly and portray the deplorable state of Adivasi people whose livelihood and sustenance have been direly threatened as all this is impinging on their life patterns. The Tribals revere nature considering it pious and inspired. This is in line with the development of a worldview which is based on sound principles of ecological preservation and veneration. The commodification of the natural world in the capitalistic worldview leads to its rapid exploitation affecting the various ecosystems which has led to environmental degradation and climate change.*

This research paper aims to analyse in different ways the environmental crisis which has endangered tribal affinity with nature thus adversely affecting their welfare and wellbeing. Such current and burning issues, which pollute the entire region resulting in sickness, disease and deaths are voiced by the writers in focus by using literature as a powerful platform because literature possess "the energy and power" to appeal to "the human community" thus striving for environmental conservation. The Research paper also looks at various solutions that mankind needs to take up for averting such natural disasters..

Keywords: Degradation, Conservation, Ecology, Ecocriticism, Climate Change

I. INTRODUCTION

Due to their proximity with nature, tribal people are deeply connected to nature. Nature coexists with them, allowing them to assemble essential commodities with their immediate environment. The livelihood and survival of these people relies on coexistence with nature, despite modern influences. Their view of nature is that it is a part of them, their extension and they celebrate how interconnected we are with nature. As part of their worship, they practice animism and worship spirits which, according to them; live in rivers, mountains, hills, forests, trees, villages, houses and other elements of nature around them. Furthermore, they also have 'totems' that are specific to each clan of their tribe that they protect and revere. These are animals or other non-human features of their surroundings. Many of the essential aspects of their lives are intimately tied to nature, including their economic life, food and drinks, art and crafts, festivities, ceremonies and rituals. Therefore, these eco-centric attitudes and practices may be able to provide us with some solutions to stop environmental degradation in the future. A study of the works of Hansda Sowvendra Shekhar and Jacinta Kerketta reveals how ecological concerns are embedded in the cultural ethos of indigenous communities in Jharkhand. The works of these writers provide us with a glimpse into the tribal way of life and thereby give us a better understanding of the people and their culture. Since their culture is deeply intertwined with the natural world, this is reflected in their works, from reverence for the natural world, coexistence between humans and non-humans and quests for peace of mind in nature, along with the struggle they endure because of the capitalistic governmental policies. As



they cover the diverse strands of ecocriticism such as bioregionalism, eco-spirituality, postcolonial ecocriticism and deep ecology, Hansda Sowvendra Shekhar's work represents a wide range of perspectives on the environment. Meanwhile, Jacinta Kerketta brilliantly portrays the sufferings of indigenous communities due to environmental degradation through poetic creativity. An ecocritical theoretical approach is employed in the paper as the methodological tool for analyzing their works critically.

Despite the dichotomy that is found in western epistemology, nature and culture have an interwoven relationship in indigenous societies. Their view is that both human and non-human life forms are in a continuous state of evolution, interacting and interdependent with each other. The literature of a particular culture deals with specific values and aspects of that culture. And therefore, Hansda Sowvendra Shekhar and Jacinta Kerketta's portrayal of the interaction between humans and non-humans in their works represents the values underlying the indigenous culture to which these authors belong. As a result of different myths and rituals performed by different cultures, man has learned how to align himself with the non-human environment. As the current dominant discourse of development being reductionistic in nature, it becomes essential for mankind to retrace its path to an understanding of ancient ways and wisdom. By reducing everything to a commodity, capitalism's materialistic attitude universalizes and homogenizes everything in its essence. Such an attitude might serve the interests of one group of individuals but in the long term it adversely affects the earth and everyone residing on it. Thus, introspection is necessary in order to change our attitudes towards the non-human world which plays a crucial role in maintaining the health of our ecosystems. Carol P. Christ rightly asserts: "The preservation of the earth requires a profound shift in consciousness: a recovery of ancient and traditional views that revere the connection of all beings in the web of life and a rethinking of the relation of humanity and divinity to nature." (Rangarajan 20)

Nature does not serve as a source of day-to-day materialistic comfort or pleasure for indigenous people; instead, nature serves as the source of their unique identity and nurturer of their life. The harmonious relationship between tribal communities and nature is the main indicator of tribal well-being as tribal lives cannot be comprehended without their association with land, forests, water, minerals, hills and other natural resources. Among tribal people, nature is considered the meaning of life, the source of their values and cultures, their best friend in life and a vital factor in their physical and psychological well-being. It is impossible for them to even imagine that they have an existence or a sense of distinctiveness without nature.

Environmental Resistance

As global environmental issues become more acutely apparent today, an ecological approach to literature becomes imperative. In order to confront the anthropocentric worldview that keeps men obsessed with their own needs and desires, but ignores the well-being of non-human counterparts, we need to re-conceptualize dichotomies such as nature and culture, body and mind, human and non-human, self and other. As proclaimed by Swarnalatha Rangarajan, "Human agency has become a significant geophysical force at par with the natural forces, modifying the world's ecosystems with a greater rapidity witnessed in any earlier period of human history replacing the Holocene with the Anthropocene" (Rangarajan 12). The result has been a multitude of environmental problems, including deforestation, glacier outbursts, floods, forest fires, climate change and more. As we face these challenges, it is important to reflect on the values of growth and development that actually result from environmental exploitation. In recent years, it has become essential to know the importance of reconnecting with nature and recognizing the interconnectedness between humans and nature.

Jacinta Kerketta

Poetry is described as a "stored energy" and "pathways which sustain life" by William Rueckert, a pioneer of ecocriticism. According to him, poetry has the strong element of "language" that a poet utilizes to translate his imaginative creativity into work in order to reach out "from the poem to the reader" (Rueckert 39). Jacinta Kerketta, a talented poet, used poetry as a strong platform to communicate the deplorable state of her people while tirelessly advocating for them at the national and international levels. "Angor" is Kerketta's first anthology. It consists of forty-one poems. Nature finds expression in each of the poems of the collection. Having come from a marginalized



community, she experienced discrimination at school, witnessed her mother suffer domestic violence and saw the mainstream media misrepresent the Adivasis, the hardships and plight of the people caused by land loss and development schemes that degraded the environment. Her poetry in a way, “questions the state’s vision of development for tribal areas”(Yadav 6). Kerketta depicts in ‘The Dust of Development’ the consequences of rapid Industrialization and Urbanization for the Adivasis - an event that does not benefit them, but robs them of a sustainable way of life: “ No footsteps more are heard, Plodding along towards the fields for addicted now are those feet To chase after trucks laden with coal Along the road... Breathing in the dust of progress Day and night life coughs in distress. The heart has aged before its time, And eyes once with hope alive Are now counting their numbered days.” (Kerketta 76).

Kerketta discusses the injustice done to the natural environment in her poem, “The Language of Man”. By drawing upon the leaf in her poem, Kerketta animates the natural images within the poem and equates it to a ‘being’, which shares the same exploitations as done to nature by human beings. The speaker, a woman, could connect to and comprehend the pains and exploitation that women and environment share on a more general level. They have no choice except to ‘watch’ and take no action. Speaking in words, silence appears to provide information “about heaven, earth, and everything in between” (Kerketta 8). Swarnalatha Rangarajan agrees with authors and critics in this regard and believes that “language is not separate from the world of nature” (Rangarajan 15). The management of forest resources by locals in tribal belts has significantly deteriorated as a result of the state’s intrusion, particularly in areas where “the poor have become so marginalized and alienated from their environment” (27) as Ramachandra Guha writes in “Environmentalism: A Global History”. There is a severe marginalization, displacement from their lands, disadvantage and dismissal of indigenous people as mere victims of oppression. In several regions of Jharkhand, mining activities have polluted the environment, making it difficult for the people to maintain a cordial relationship with nature. Consequently, such an environment has resulted in health hazards that cause sickness and disease to strike both children and adults equally. The poem “The Six-Lane Freeway of Deceit” depicts the real situation that is hidden under the banner of ‘progress’: “Agents of mining corporations Knock on every villager door. And no sooner is uttered A desperate sigh of hunger, Disease, unemployment, and helplessness.” (Kerketta 116) The poem “The Mystery of the Forest Bamboos” emphasizes the suffering of every displaced Adivasi who lost their homes, sustainable lifestyles in accordance with the rich forest lands due to the ‘politics of development’ reoccurring, which disregards the tribal people’s means of sustenance and livelihood: “On the sweeping claws of an excavator My fields from its very roots severed. On that machine hung Not just that piece of land, but I as well, And I realised then The agony of being uprooted from one’s soil.” (Kerketta 92) The tribal people’s source of food and livelihood was taken away by the disappearance of native soil. The poet frequently discusses the famine and hunger of the displaced tribals who lack access to farms and forest food. Kerketta’s poem “When Hunger Burns” captures the appalling state of the oppressed tribal communities: “From the roti wrapped in a leaf, Rise and transform into poetry. A poem, roasting on the fire of hunger, Begins to hum a tune, And, at its call rise together The fires of many homes Against all that fuels this fire of hunger.” (Kerketta 56)

In the process of ‘development’ initiated by capitalist organizations and state machinery, indigenous peoples lost their lands, property, green fields, and forests. Development schemes and projects like coal mining, copper factories, thermal plants, roads, dams, hydroelectricity and other projects were also undertaken. Despite the fact that the government took steps to develop the infrastructure and socio-economic aspects of the regions inhabited by the indigenous people, it failed to take their welfare and injustices into account. The ‘development projects’ have only benefited multinational corporations because they ignore the tribal people’s necessities that define their means of subsistence. Indigenous peoples have been robbed to the core by ‘development’ schemes. As Kerketta points out, dam construction has had a negative impact on the lives of indigenous people in a witty manner: “To build the dams they were asked to give their blood, their sweat, even their tears”. (Kerketta 115)

In her work on environmental discrimination and sustainability, Jonah M. Williams asserts that India “has invested a significant amount into the development and promotion of (these) new technologies” (15) as a rebellious reaction to state’s plans. But despite these indications that a “developing nation” is speeding toward ‘development’, it may be argued that Kerketta’s poems are a clue that Williams was right when he said that India needed to put an emphasis on “Environmental Sustainability”. Williams writes that India should consider “the long untreated socio-political issues of



the discrimination and infrastructure” (18), the failure of which will “impact its ability to reach new sustainability goals...considering sustainable solutions which allow disadvantaged people increased environmental justice” (20) become the priority of the nation.

The poem “The River, The Mountain and The Bazaar” is an ironic commentary on people as whole and says that people are redundant in their desire to preserve the natural world and tranquil environment as a work of art in photographs or painting. This also runs counter to the extreme ‘ignorance’ and callousness individuals exhibit toward the destruction and harm done to nature and the environment: “Little Posterity ran on—We’re here at the bazaar! What would you like to buy, the shopkeeper asked. Brother, a little rain, a handful wet earth, A bottle of river, and that mountain preserved There, hanging on the wall, a piece of nature as well.” (Kerketta 46) Kerketta uses powerful, heartbreaking imagery to demonstrate the extent of oppression indigenous communities face. Native communities were forced to give up their lands, their source of sustenance that relies on the ecosystem they live in. The indigenous people protested against it, which often led to a rebellion that ended in violence and bloodshed. The mighty trees have preserved the history and stories of the indigenous people’s struggle for their lands. As a result of the tribal people’s close relationship with nature, they have witnessed many uprisings in their lands. However, Kerketta’s goal is not to start a violent movement; rather, she uses poetry as a non-violent form of protest against the injustice and oppression meted out to marginalized Adivasi communities as a result of industrialization and rapid urbanization, which have a devastating impact on the environment.

Hansda Sowvendra Shekhar

Santhal by ancestry, modern Anglophone Indian author Hansda Sowvendra Shekhar stories are rich in fine details that add to deep dimensions and open to us a world we have deliberately dismissed. He referred to his debut book as “the first full-fledged Santhal novel written in English”. This piece of work depicts the Santhal community’s cultural landscape. They contend with numerous incidents involving their worldview, practices and beliefs. With all of its minute features, it paints a realistic image of Santhali life.

The novel “The Mysterious Ailment of Rupy Baskey” deals with the story of Baskey family living in the village Kadamdihi in Jharkhand. There are many references to nature throughout the novel and the names of the various places mentioned in the novel are derived from local environmental conditions that are examples of the bioregional characteristics of that area. Tereldihi, for instance, is named after its abundance of hills, Sarjomdih is named after its abundance of Sarjom trees and Kadamdihi is named after its abundance of Kadam trees: “Kadamdihi was named after Kadam tree. No Kadam trees are to be found in Kadamdihi anymore...but Putki recalls that there were many when her father and other elders founded the village. There was a forest of kadam trees down by the streams.” (Hansda 20) The absence of kadam trees in the village is extremely ironic. This shows that the forest has diminished over time as a result of man’s encroachment and that the community was once famous for its kadam trees. This represents the gradual changes in that bioregion brought on by growing human activity, which resulted in the loss of a significant component of the bioregional flora in that area. And for the diverse ecosystems to function properly, a bioregion must be maintained. Another scene from the same book shows how industrialization affects local customs and beliefs that uphold the principles of harmony with others and reverence for environment. Their worldview-forming ceremonial acts appear to have been impacted by the contemporary situation. He problematizes this subject in the book to emphasize the significance of these rites, without which the tribal community would collapse. Through their use of rituals, the Santhals connect with the supernatural realm. “Ritual is valuable cultural tool in the bioregional vision that help humans bond with each other, as well as with place and non-human nature” (Rangarajan 18). As Datta-Majumdar noted, “The Santhals live not only in their human tribal society but in a greater society consisting of supernatural beings as well”. (Troisi 11)

Furthermore, “My Father’s Garden” another important work of fiction by him, contains further similar episodes addressing ecocritical issues. The story touches on Santhali culture in many regions and embodies the idea of peaceful coexistence between humans and non-living things. Along with the specifics of the ceremonies performed in the Jaherthan, it discusses the important festivals of Baha and Maak Moray. The following passage from the book, which defines Jaherthan’s constitution and importance, provides more context for the topic of Jaherthan in ecology



perspective: “In Kessorpur, the Jaher was a plot of land, common to everyone, where farming was not allowed. The cutting of tree was forbidden and they flourished there. In the middle stood the huge banyan tree and at a distance from it were two gigantic Sal trees. Under these trees was the heart of the Jaher, the shrine of Marang Buru and Jaher Ayo, our chief deities.” (Hansda 56) The Santhali people’s contact with the non-human environment is fundamental to how they live. As a result of their conviction that they are both connected to one another, they begin to develop an ecological consciousness. A tribal person is unable to envision his own life isolated from others. He maintains a relationship with his community, which is made up of both human and non-human beings. They view the health and well-being of the non-human world as a requirement for the human world’s health and well-being, as the narrator in “My Father’s Garden” suggests: “How lush and beautiful the Jaher had once been, how men and animals stayed healthy and productive until the end of their days. A time when one could walk about everywhere fearlessly.” (Hansda 199) The narrator expresses his intense anguish about the village manjhi’s cutting down of the Sal trees in the Jaherthan (the sacred groove) in another really effective and moving segment. He complains, “What would he have gained by cutting down these trees? To kill a tree is savage. It is like murdering a man. Yet we couldn’t say anything. Those trees were common property”. (Hansda 212)

In his book “The Adivasi Will Not Dance” with the same title story, holds that the “twin gifts of Industrialization and progress” led to the “collapse of an agrarian Adivasi society and the dilution of Adivasi culture.” (43) It offers a forceful critique of the contemporary idea of ‘development’. This piece is centered on the exploitation of both nature and its inhabitants and addresses the topic of postcolonial ecocriticism. The following lines discuss the issue of deterritorialization that the tribal community is facing as a result of the various ongoing developmental projects. This issue is reflected in the short story’s setting up of a thermal power plant, where the narrator objects to the project and asks, “which great nation displaces thousands of its people from their homes and livelihoods to produce electricity for cities and factories? And jobs? An Adivasi farmer’s job is to farm. Which other job should he be made to do?” (Hansda 58) The exploitation of the Santhals by the mainstream culture is marked by Hansda in the same chapter’s narration by Mangal Murmu, who laments, “We Santhals can sing and dance, and we are good at our art. What has our art, however, offered us? Tuberculosis, displacement” (Hansda 75). Here, there is a clear connection between environmental deterioration and how it affects human health and way of life. The story ends with Mangal Murmu rebelling against capitalistic development and raising questions about environmental justice for his people.

II. CONCLUSION

Thus, we find act of resisting against the destruction done to the environment alongside threatening the survival of Tribal people finds its fullest expression in their work. They portray Tribal culture having close communion with nature, they tend to believe the non-human world as an extension of the higher reality. They revere nature considering it pious and inspirited. This leads to a development of a worldview which is based on sound principles of ecological preservation and veneration. The commodification of the natural world in the capitalistic worldview leads to its rapid exploitation affecting the various ecosystems which are interconnected to support life on earth. Through their works they appeal straight to humanity at large with environmental issues that threaten the existence of human kind along with the earth on which reside.

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