

Representation of Forest in the Poems of Jacinta Kerketta: An Ecocritical Perspective

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Abstract

Forest has often been employed as imagined spaces in narratives of various kinds and different cultures. Literature of any culture is an expression of its cultural attitudes, values, and beliefs. The non-human world is a significant part of human life and culture. However, a dualistic approach treating nature and culture as binary opposites has become prevalent in modern times. This approach is inherently flawed and leads to a discourse stripping nature of its agency. Jacinta Kerketta belongs to one of the important tribes, inhabiting the Chota Nagpur plateau of the Indian subcontinent and its adjoining regions, named the Oraon tribe. Her poems present a discourse of tribal worldview where humans identify themselves with the non-human world surrounding them. This biocentric identification with one's environment is important as we are part of various ecosystems. The paper seeks to highlight the same with the help of select verses along with the analysis of the representation of forest from various perspectives. It also foregrounds the various contemporary issues prevalent in tribal societies like deforestation, cultural amnesia, etc., and presents a critique of capitalism. The paper employs an ecocritical theoretical framework for the analysis of the select poems from her two Poetry Collections titled *Angor* (2016) and *Land of the Roots* (2018).

Keywords

Forest, tribal, non-human, capitalism, biocentrism, culture, ecocriticism

Introduction

Forests are the predominant terrestrial ecosystem on Earth and are found all around the globe. The forest has been seen in multiple ways; even historical changes altered the focus with which the human world perceives forests. Sometimes, the forest has been portrayed and perceived as a romantic space, a fictive paradise while at other times, a habitat of unknown powers, a site where demons and other powers reside. The forest is not a neutral item that is “out there” but rather its role and definition change as its interaction with human life occurs. The forest finds its place in the early compositions of Indian epics like *Rāmāyana* and *Mahābhārata* and plays like *Abhijñāna-śākuntalam* (by Kālidāsa) which hints at both the dichotomy and the complementarity of the space of “Forest” and the space of “Settlement,” i.e. “*Vana*” and “*Kṣetra*,” respectively. A noteworthy point is foregrounded in the context of the forest by an eminent historian, Romila Thapar, that “In early India, the forest was the context for at least three activities: the hunt, the hermitage, and the place of exile” (145). There are different sorts of representations of the forest space in literature of various kinds. Forest dwellers or tribes have occupied various regions of the forests from time immemorial.

The poems of Jacinta Kerketta expose the contemporary situation of tribal people and represent the space of a forest from a forest dweller's point of view. She employs a non-dualistic approach towards the non-human agencies occupying the forest space. A biocentric approach marks her stance where she is aware of the interconnectedness among various human and non-human occupants of the forest. The mainstream culture of "non-forest dwellers" marginalizes the dwellers for the sake of so-called developmental projects. Her poetry seems to present a resistance against the biased governing structures in a prejudiced world. The paper seeks to analyze her verses from an ecocritical perspective, employing its various strands of deep ecology, postcolonial ecocriticism, the concept of slow violence, etc. to foreground the unequal treatment of the non-human world and the one living in its close affiliation within forests, i.e. the tribals or the natives. The careful analysis of the representation of the forest in the poems of Jacinta Kerketta is significant in probing the root cause of the environmental issues plaguing the human world in modern times, i.e. the loss of connection with the non-human world.

Representation of Forest in Jacinta Kerketta's Selected Poems

Forest finds a recurrent address in the poems of Jacinta Kerketta. She belongs to the Oraon tribe, one of the significant tribes of the Chota Nagpur plateau of Jharkhand and its adjoining regions in the Indian subcontinent. She was born "in Khudpos village of Manoharpur Block adjacent to the sprawling *Saranda* Jungle in West Singhbhum district of Jharkhand" in India (Kerketta 163). Jharkhand, also referred to as "The Land of Forest" is a state in eastern India. The various poems selected for the present study are "Bloodstained Rivers," "Care," "Huffing and Puffing Machines," and "The Weapons in My Hands" from her two anthologies titled *Angor* and *Land of the Roots* respectively.

Tribes have a strong affiliation with the forest. They inhabit it, depend upon it for their survival, and worship the various spirits which according to their earth-centric spirituality inhabit various parts of the forest like rivers, hills, mountains, huts, sacred groves, etc. Sacred groves are spaces of utmost devotion in Sarnaism. Cutting of trees is prohibited in such areas of land and it is believed to be the residence of holy spirits. Deities inhabiting the sacred grove are worshipped and propitiated during various festivals. Such practices play a crucial role in preserving the local biodiversity. Various rituals are performed in this sacred part of the forest and definite care needs to be taken in its maintenance. Entry of common people is prohibited in this area of land, especially in certain seasons. Since the poet belongs to one of such prominent tribes, her poems are a representation of tribal worldview from an insider's point of view. Forest is a significant part and parcel of tribals' lives and hence, the depiction of forest in her poems is recurrent and addressed from various perspectives of tribes. One of the features of Kerketta's poetry is the conversational tone in her poems. They present tiny narratives of tribal ways of living along with the portrayals of the issues faced by those societies. The poems represent the mutual interconnection and interdependence between the human and the non-human agencies in maintaining the web of life on Earth.

The poem captioned "Bloodstained Rivers" portrays the agony of forest and forest-dwellers when acts of deforestation devastate them. It narrates the anguish of the entire nature

composite of both human and non-human agents like trees, rivers, and people inhabiting the forest named ‘*Sârandâ*’ (“a forest located in West Singhbhum region, Jharkhand, in North India”):

Hands stained with the blood
Of a thousand slaughtered trees
Quietly wash themselves clean
In the rivers of *Sârandâ*.

And the waters drenched in blood bewail,
Weeping on the shoulders of riverbanks,
And the entire forest sees red.

.....
Eyes seeking the truth cower,
Starving voices, raised in protest,
Nibble at morsels of hope and solace,
While endless streams of desperate tears
Weep the bloodstained rivers. (Kerketta 45)

Here, we can observe how nature gains agency in the verses of Jacinta Kerketta. The dualistic approach treating nature and culture as binary opposites has become prevalent in modern times. This approach is inherently flawed and leads to a discourse stripping nature of its agency. The Western reductionist discourse of development dictated by capitalist patriarchy is responsible for the reduction of nature from the status of vibrantly living to being considered dead matter. Vandana Shiva, an eminent Indian Scholar and environmental activist, reiterates the fact through her critique of the present course of development as “Maldevelopment” which denies agency to the natural world and considers it a dead matter. She states:

Maldevelopment is the violation of the integrity of organic, interconnected, and interdependent systems, that sets in motion a process of exploitation, inequality, injustice, and violence. It is blind to the fact that recognition of nature’s harmony and action to maintain it are preconditions for distributive justice. (5)

Silencing of nature in Western culture took place in the medieval period after the collapse of animistic societies argues, Christopher Manes, due to the introduction of two powerful institutional technologies, i.e., literacy and Christian exegesis (18). Nature is not dead but rather living and this is an established scientific fact now. The fact that they cannot talk in our language or in a language that we are capable of deciphering does not make them dead. Hence, imparting voice to the non-human world has become relevant in modern times through efforts as displayed in the poems of Jacinta Kerketta. An alternate reality that exists for the sake of common welfare could only be made visible when such worldviews are foregrounded. Such efforts could contribute to restoring the health of our planet, Earth.

The poem titled “Care” displays a “biocentric ethics of care” towards the non-human world. The representation of forest is from a tribal’s point of view as living, inspiring, and useful

in their living state contrary to the capitalists' point of view who value it as a source for extraction of timber. The poem is in the form of a conversation between a child and his/her mother. It foregrounds the concern of a mother for a "living tree" and here the poem displays ecological sensibilities entrenched in the tribal worldview. The mother, when asked by her child the reason behind her continuous labor in collecting just "a bundle of firewood" from such a dense forest, answers:

I scour the woods,
Climb over hills,
Wander the whole day
For dry firewood-just one bundle-
As I'm wary of cutting a living tree,
Out of care for my jungle. (Kerketta 165)

An environmentally sensitive discourse is presented in the verses of Jacinta Kerketta. The subsistence perspective is valued in tribal interaction with the non-human world.

Another poem "The Jungle Says" portrays the strong bond that human beings share with the forest space in a tribal worldview. The human community identifies itself with the forest ecosystem in such cultures. The poem displays a perfect expression of the state of interconnection between the human and the non-human world. The culture that flourishes in such a space has a strong influence on the natural world:

A man of the jungle learns
The art of walking from its meandering trails.
The trees teach him to grow and blossom.
To dance he learns from the rollicking rain.
And songs,
Like mushrooms,
Burst forth naturally. (Kerketta 77)

The poem also foregrounds the "forest" as a site accommodating diversity. The various ecosystems of forest understand and respect the significance of the diversity it upholds:

The jungle says
An ocean it can never be,
For in its merging into the ocean
Every river is stripped of its identity.
The jungle alone sustains,
Each with its identity it maintains. (Kerketta 77)

Thus, each being enjoys its unique place and intrinsic value in the lap of nature. Here, the poem seems to be in tandem with the various tenets of Deep Ecology, the principles of which are as proposed by Arné Naess according to which:

The flourishing of human and nonhuman living beings has intrinsic worth. The worth of nonhuman beings is independent of their usefulness for human purposes... The richness and diversity of life forms on earth, including forms of human cultures, have intrinsic

worth. Humans have no right to reduce this richness and diversity, except to satisfy vital needs. (Guha 116-117)

The space of the forest is imbued with agency and it asserts the importance of the multiplicity it upholds and nurtures. The poem is also suggestive of the possibility of how distancing the “man of the forest” from “his abode” could strip him of his cultural identity:

Far from easy, it is to kill
A man of the jungle on his home ground.
And so, they build roads
Leading out of the jungle’s cover.
For they know one day,
Following these roads, he will be led astray,
And all will be wiped away:

His meandering walk,
His rollicking dance,
His growing and blossoming as trees,
And the songs, which were once like mushrooms,
Burst forth naturally. (Kerketta 77-79)

The tribal communities undergo cultural amnesia and a sense of rootlessness in the modern scenario as their culture is tampered with by external influences and interventions. It also leads to issues like deterritorialization, pollution, starvation, etc. Rob Nixon’s *Slow Violence and the Environmentalism of the Poor* (2011), articulates the connection between ecocriticism and postcolonial studies through “Slow Violence,” the notion that environmental threats such as climate change, toxic drift, deforestation, and oil spills are problems that are “slow” to reveal themselves, but afflict people who are poor, powerless, and displaced in the Global South. The entire lifestyle of tribal people is affected by neo-colonial interventions and they are forced to undergo various compromises in modern times.

The next poem addresses a yet very ironic situation where a certain section of the human world, to fulfill their unrequited greed of desires, devastates the natural world by engaging themselves in act of deforestation but sooner develop a desire for “the cool shadow of the trees” after facing the consequences in the form of environmental calamities. This poem is also a critique of capitalist-driven developmental programs. The human race for the so-called development has reduced itself to “Machines” but has to face the stark truth that after all he/she is a human being, an interconnected entity in the web of living ecosystems, and not a machine. In the same line, the poem “Huffing and Puffing Machines” from the anthology *Land of the Roots*, quite concisely and aptly expresses the dilemma and suffering of the modern world:

Having uprooted the trees
Out of breath are the machines.
And now these huffing and puffing machines
Are you searching for the cool shade of a tree? (Kerketta 157)

Another poem titled “The Weapons in My Hands” addresses the continuous struggle faced by tribal people to safeguard their culture, their forests, and their land, even at the cost of their lives. It also expresses the injustices inflicted upon them by the mainstream society. Here, the aspects of postcolonial ecocriticism become conspicuous. Swarnalatha Rangarajan, an eminent ecocritic, mentions the main objective of this field is “to resist and critique the homogenization of spaces, which is a result of the practices of colonialism as well as global capitalism” (90). The poem presents the narrator’s mother protesting the whole day against the unjust power structures in the modern world to protect their land and the assaults met by her, as a consequence of displaying her resistance:

Mother returns that night,
Her head was in a bandage white,
And dark blood
Trickling down the forehead.
Gazing intently at her face,
I touch the red stream of blood
And feel my boil in my veins.
She took me on her lap that day
And the only words she said –
“We are fighting
For our land, for our soil,
And to preserve our very being.
A fight you too must fight after me. (Kerketta 61)

Further, she brings the poem at a poignant and heart-rending note when her mother after leaving the home one morning, does not return home back, as is killed while protesting. The poem ends at an important juncture foregrounding the issues faced by the tribal societies and raising questions that urgently need to be addressed by those holding positions of power in the contemporary scenario. It also showcases how the perspective of the tribals is ignored and they are most often marginalized in the postcolonial world. Besides, they are also labeled casually as ‘militants’ when they start claiming their rights aggressively when left unheard. Not only the human world but also the non-human agencies like the land and the forests undergo equal exploitation and misappropriation:

They may see only the militancy,
But their eyes fail to see
My centuries old-agony,
Wounds afflicted ages upon,
Still fresh, still raw,
And scars running through
My body and soul,
Left by claws dipped in poison,
As they plundered and robbed.

All that others can see
Are my forests, my land,
And

The weapons in my hand. (Kerketta 63)

Forest is represented in the poem as a “cultural identifier” as perceived inside the tribal worldview due to the strong bond of affiliation shared by the tribes with their land. In the modern worldview, the forest is perceived as “a resource” to be plundered by capitalists and misappropriated for financial gains. There is a stark difference in the representation of forest in the tribal worldview vis-à-vis modern worldview as represented in the poem. It exposes the reason behind the present environmental declension since humans have segregated themselves from their non-human co-inhabitants which are rather essential for their existence. This ideology is even forced upon such communities who still prefer to live in co-existence with nature for their sustenance and fight to preserve their cultural identity.

Conclusion

Michael P. Branch refers to ecocriticism as a “call for cultural change” which is not merely an exercise in analyzing nature in literature but a “move towards a more biocentric world-view, an extension of ethics, a broadening of humans” conception of the global community to include nonhuman life forms and the physical environment’ (qtd. in Rangarajan 7). Hence, it could be said that the above poems analyzed in this paper foreground the flaws inherent in the modern worldview dictated by the capitalists’ discourse of development. Also, the poems seek to establish a dialogue between the human and the non-human world. The representation of the forest is from a biocentric perspective acknowledging the interconnections and interdependences between different agencies of the ecosystem.

The forest is described as a sentient being displaying feelings and emotions of various kinds. It is also represented as a space exhibiting diversity. Further, the forest has also been interpreted as a space of struggle between two conflicting worldviews. It also finds its representation as a site of violence perpetrated by the one in power, i.e., the state-sponsored capitalists over the other, marginalized, i.e. the forest and the forest dwellers, in the form of deforestation and urbanization. Another representation of the forest is as a site of dwelling for the tribal community which again exhibits biocentric sensibilities. They don’t treat the non-human world as binary opposites but rather as ‘interconnected subjects,’ to which they care, value, and revere. The forest is also represented as a cultural identifier as people in tribal societies develop their identities in the context of the non-human world surrounding them, i.e. the forest. Since the forest space was misappropriated in the postcolonial era, the people occupying it were also marginalized and maltreated. The well-known ecocritical work of Huggan and Tiffin titled *Postcolonial Ecocriticism*, suggests the need to dismantle the “species boundary” or the constructed antagonism between the humans and the non-humans in the postcolonial world. Huggan and Tiffin reject such a notion of development in their book. They argue:

...development is at best a form of strategic altruism, in which technical and financial assistance from the self-designated First World is geared to its own economic and

political concerns. Perhaps the most extreme form of this view is that development is little more than a myth propagated by the West that, under the guise of assisted modernization, re-establishes the very rift (social, political, and economic) between the First and Third Worlds that it claims to want to heal (Huggan and Tiffin 28).

One of the central tasks of postcolonial ecocriticism is to contest and provide an alternative to the Western ideology of development and globalization. It seeks to claim the rights of the marginalized, i.e., the tribal community and the non-human world for holistic development. Thus, a careful analysis of the representation of forests from the various standpoints of ecocriticism helps to foreground the complex relationship between the human and the non-human world and the issues faced by tribal societies.

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