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Land and the Indigenous Identity: A Reading of C K Janu's *The Mother Forest* and Margaret Tucker's if *Everyone Cared*

Sreesakhi K

An individual's identity serves to define their personal and collective consciousness and traits while interacting with a specific social group. For indigenous people, it is allied to the misfortune of being excluded from social hierarchical structures. The contemporary status of indigenous communities is marginal and vulnerable when compared with their traditional ways of life, and indigenous discourse has argued that mainstream society has a pivotal role in relegating them to the position of second citizens in many regions worldwide. As part of identifying and analysing the problematic nature of indigenous identities, the present paper addresses the interplay of factors that enable these people to enhance their multiple roles and powers in their traditional communities and also ascertains the changes that occurred as part of shaping their subjectivities. The concept of land is pivotal as an essential resource and a means of subsistence for indigenous people. Possessing their traditional lands empowers indigenous women to achieve the status of complete women in their communities and boosts their self-assertion. This paper is based on the hypothesis that indigenous women address issues that revolve around their identities, and emphasizes that the place of belonging is an essential and dominant factor in defining their multiple roles. The advent of colonization and the subsequent loss of their

traditional lands adversely affected both their communities and their selves. This upheaval is elucidated in the writings of indigenous women, and this study examines two such works—C. K. Janu's Mother Forest: The Unfinished Story of C. K. Janu (2004), and Margaret Tucker's If Everyone Cared (1994).

Keywords: Identity, Indigenous, Adivasi, Aborigine, Colonialism, Settler Nation

The concept of identity is one of the most debated topics in contemporary scholarship. Serious interventions have been made to explain the notion and its basic traits, and how this concept is used in multiple disciplines to attain a multidimensional stature. The essential and relative factors of defining persons are explained in these ways and contextualize them to specific socio-cultural domains. The identity also defines the person's character as it highlights cultural aspects, beliefs, and expression of the self that constitutes the individual. The concept encompasses core social categories such as race, class ethnicity, gender, disability, and sexuality in connection with changes in time and space. In the process, people try to envisage themselves as discrete, separate entities. In other words, through defining oneself, the individual attempts to explain the similarities that they share with others, and simultaneously, tries to differentiate oneself from them to assert a unique nature. It can be considered as a process of becoming rather than existing in a state of being; becoming is a process that can be opened up for change and transformation rather than occupying a static position.

Individual and collective identities differ. Individual identities are also referred to as personal identities. In "Collective Identity and Expressive Forms", David Snow explained the term personal identity. Personal identity is oriented and has been credited to explaining one's self. Collective identity denotes an individual's sense of belonging to a particular group and shares common traits with the particular community. Snow observes that collective identities are shaped through the interaction of two or more participants. It is considered as a process. Nevertheless, these two identities sometimes intersect and overlap by nature, and hence, it is a complicated task to differentiate between them. In fact, in "Welcome to the Jungle: Identity and Diversity in

Postmodern Politics", Kobena Mercer reminds us that issues regarding one's identity is problematized when its state of being in a fixed, coherent, and stable condition is displaced by doubt and uncertainty (43).

Indigenous groups are considered the first inhabitants of their territories. Multiple terminologies have been employed to indicate various indigenous cultural groups based on the geographical locations that they inhabited for centuries as they gradually evolved to an ethnic group or community. Indigenous groups in Canada are referred to as the people of the First Nation and in India, they are called Adivasis. In America, these groups are generally known as Native Americans, and in Australia, they are Aborigines. Heterogeneous indigenous groups exist under these umbrella terms and they manifest various socio-cultural traits that render them unique. Their identities are understood as one of the most problematic, as they have undergone many changes at different periods due to multiple reasons such as the intervention of colonialism, settler nationalism, and direct and indirect influences of other dominant social categories. Becoming indigenous and explaining the same is a matter of survival for these people and it cannot be identified as the mere representation of their selves; the process encompasses political strategies that they adopt to delineate their indigenous social roles. Indigenous people give more emphasis to the collective consciousness rather than their individual selves. Betty Jacobs observed the relationship between indigenous people and their traditional land in her article "Indigenous Identity: Summary and Future Directions":

> The human condition for Indigenous people is sometimes described as marginal, minority and vulnerable. Yet Indigenous people have a distinctly full human experience defined by a deep sense of belonging to a place from which our people were created. This is Indigenous identity. Interaction of distinctive people over millennia create biological and cultural variation that bind groups together. (1)

As part of their political engagement towards recreating their indigenous identities, indigenous people claim to possess histories that have been hidden by the dominant discourses so far. The indigenous

discourse discloses to the world their intense and long-drawn-out struggle for independence, the exploitation by mainstream social groups, and concerns regarding survival in the contemporary world. They also use these discourses to reclaim their lost dignity, history, and culture. As Jacobs observed, "concepts of cultural belonging, self-determination, and sovereignty are also associated with identity" (3).

Indigenous writers and activists emphasize that the place of belonging or possessing one's own land is crucial while addressing their identities. They have spiritual connectivity with their traditional lands and territories, and the state of belonging to their traditional lands is deeply rooted in their cultures and histories. The land is not just a physical space for indigenous people; rather, they believe that their ancestors' presence can be felt in nature. Prior to colonization, these people managed their land and the environment in sustainable ways for generations, as they believed in that human beings belonged to nature and not the other way around. Indigenous people have argued that natural resources were used for their livelihood and had nurtured their communities for ages. The land is connected to all spheres of their lives and it is the authority by which these people engage with their selves, families, and communities; thus, it is an inseparable part of their identities and is essential for each individual's existence. "Indigenous Peoples-Lands, Territories and Natural Resources" elucidates this bonding between the land and indigenous people:

Stella Tamang, an indigenous leader from Nepal, summarizes the relationship saying, "[I]ndigenous peoples…have an intimate connection to the land; the rationale for talking about who they are is tied to the land. They have clear symbols in their language that connect them to places on their land….in Nepal, we have groups that only can achieve their spiritual place on the planet by going to a certain location".

Indigenous people's control over their lands helps them to regulate their social institutions, cultures, and traditions, and empowers them to achieve their needs. Indigenous cosmologies are different from the western ideologies of land and environment, and their connectivity to human beings. The differences in their perspectives can be found in the Dreamtime stories of Aboriginal Australians. Dreamtime is a term

used to describe the unique stories and beliefs of Aboriginals from the beginning of their first settlement in Australia. They emphasize the sustainability of nature, and the significance of maintaining the bonding between an individual and the environment. Indigenous oral traditions are a treasure house of knowledge regarding the concept, origin, and the working nature of the universe. These oral traditions also reveal the role and purpose of individuals—male, female, and other gendered identities—and the community, and explain how these societies should be structured and operated. These tales rendered down the generations point out the essentiality of keeping the balance of humans, nature, the land, and sustainable development through their co-existence. As these tales are an effective medium of communication in indigenous communities, the moral lessons involved are easily conveyed and followed for generations. Essentially, the majority of indigenous communities enjoyed harmonious ways of living with nature.

Indigenous people claim that these balanced ways were adversely affected by the intervention of settlers, especially by the dominant social classes that implemented several regional and national policies in the name of indigenous welfare in later years. These interventions have a heavy impact on indigenous communities. Contemporary indigenous discourses share the forceful displacement and the relocation of these people by colonizers, which resulted in their social exclusion and denied access to natural resources that were essential for their livelihood. On the one hand, the dispossession of their land and environment from indigenous people created serious health issues and led to the extinction of many indigenous groups across the world. On the other, these people lost their centre; the absence of their places of belonging ruptured their traditions, cultures, and histories, and created new generations that belonged nowhere. This marginal position has been documented in "Indigenous Peoples-Lands, Territories and Natural Resources" as follows: "According to Erica Irene Daes, a UN Special Rapporteur in 2002, "The gradual deterioration of indigenous societies can be traced to the non-recognition of the profound relationship that indigenous peoples have to their lands, territories, and resources"".

The political engagement of the various indigenous groups, their prime focus, and claims are to retrieve their rights to their lost lands. Accordingly, multifarious movements were conducted in various regions in connection with the indigenous renaissance during the latter half of the twentieth century, which demanded that the nations concerned must relocate indigenous people to their traditional lands and restore their rights of possession by which they can reconstitute their fragmented heritage.

Indigenous life writing is one of the dominant genres that address issues of identities, self-determination, and sovereignty. When compared to men, indigenous women have dominated the genre of life writing and have explored issues in connection with indigenous affairs. The predominant theme is the contemporary problematic status of indigenous identities and alternate ways for their self-assertion. Indigenous women writers claim that they are excluded more than their male counterparts; problems of being indigenous become more complicated when it is allied with gender disparity. Indigenous women explore the land and environment more than men because of their dependence on resources in their land for multiple purposes, and the forceful displacement of land affected the women more poignantly. Elisa Scalise's reiterates this fact in "Indigenous Women's Land Rights: Case Studies from Africa": "When communities are dispossessed of their land, women are often disproportionately affected because of their traditional role in procuring water, fuel or trading goods for their families" (53).

These women have emphasized that the land gives them autonomy to work within the community. In many indigenous communities, women possessed knowledge of traditional nutritious food, weather and climate change, medicinal plants and herbs, the specialty of the land and its unique creatures, etc. Moreover, a few indigenous communities nurtured myths that venerated the land as a female deity and identified it as a mother figure. In Australia, many Aboriginal cultural corroborees and rituals were celebrated and the dominant role was played by Aboriginal women. These women were considered as the custodian of their cultures and the cultural practices were inseparably connected with the land. These women who exercised power and

authority in many Aboriginal practices later became mere sexual objects in the hands of the colonized. This phenomenon was found in other indigenous communities in Canada, New Zealand, India, and the United States.

Contemporary indigenous women writers address these concerns and invite readers to decipher their identity and the complexity revolving around it. In *The Mother Forest* (2004), C. K. Janu, a pioneer Adivasi activist from the Adiya community in Kerala, India, and in If *Everyone Cared* (1994), Margaret Tucker, who hails from a mixed Aboriginal heritage in Australia, shares concerns and issues in connection with their traditional lands and express how these lands are linked with their indigenous identities. Both these writers address their lineage, the nature of their indigenous identities, the exploitation of their land by the dominant classes and the invaders, and the subsequent land right movements in the latter half of the twentieth century.

Janu, who belongs to the Adiya community, while documenting her life with the help of a translator, explicitly represents the life of the Adivasi people in Kerala from the late twentieth century to the present. She delineates her people's experience in connection with their traditional land, as signified in the title of her work *Mother Forest* (2004), which aligns the bonding between the forest and Janu to her relationship with her mother. Janu argues: "No one knows the forest like we do the forest is mother to us more than a mother because she never abandons us" (5). This umbilical relationship points to the strong affinity to the land. The forest is not just a physical space but shares a spiritual bonding with her people. Their spiritual connectivity to the land is identified in their worship of the native place. She claims that her people did not have any religion; they considered the land as the source of supreme power and respected its creatures. Janu observes that "in our Community, there are no gods or goddesses like among Hindus, never seen or heard of fair fat gods or goddesses in our tradition like in the Calendars" (19). She adds: "When we were young there used to be a big tree near our hut in Thrisssileri and a stone placed underneath it we used to worship that our forefathers rested there once in a year we appeased them there used to be some rituals for that always when it was cold and the trees shed their leaves"

(19). Their spiritual bonding with their land is based on the space that their forefathers rested, whose presence they could experience in living and non-living things. "All our songs, customs, and medicinal practices were born from the system of life that we adopted as intimately related to the earth. They have no existence in a different system" (49). Janu reiterates the contrast in the migrant people's sense of possessing the land: "A great discovery was made that land was a commodity to be sold and bought." (48). She adds: "The new migrants divided the land into fragments and used them for different types of agriculture. They began to extract profit, instead of yield from the land. They called them commercial crops. Paddy fields began to dwindle" (30). The exploitation of Adivasi people and their lands by the dominant classes and their actions that polluted the earth are emphasized here. She has vehemently criticized deforestation and says that it made indigenous people's lives vulnerable. They did not build homes when all the trees were cut down by intruders, because twigs for the roof and heavy wood for the base and walls were lacking. The intervention of outsiders and the new forms of lifestyle enforced by migrant people are a threat to her community. Janu says: "The life cycle of our people, their customs and very existence are bound to the earth. This is more so than in any other society. When projects are designed without any link to this bond, our people suffer. This may be wrong if looked at from the point of view of civil society. But it is self-evident when we go to the newly formed colonies" (47).

Janu agrees with other indigenous women writers that her people's main problem is related to their work, land, and food. She justifies their fight to reclaim their land:

> 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 is why, for the sake of our sheer existence on this land, we are forced to struggle against all centres of power. (55)

Janu reiterates the Adivasi vision that "...women are the guardians of their culture" (ix). Major culturally bound practices such as

dance, music, and rituals are connected to the land. The songs her people sing while working in the paddy field encompass the stories of the land, and raw materials they use for the production of their musical instruments are collected from their land. She affirms that her people engage in work that is connected with the land, and women spend more time on the land than the men in her community. Their role is not limited to the western way of being a woman in society. Though both men and women depend upon the land for their daily sustenance, Janu claims that women have more responsibilities in both work and domestic spheres of life. The unity of these women has the strength to make them the guardian of their culture and the land. She vehemently criticizes the enforcement of gender roles in their social structure by the dominant societies, including the migrant people. These westernized gender roles have been adapted to the dominant social class structures in India through colonial policies, which were inserted by settler institutions as part of the colonial project. Janu adds that feminism need not be injected into her community because its women had enjoyed the space and autonomy to express themselves down the ages. Nevertheless, westernized gender roles imposed by outsiders made their men irresponsible and took away their control of the land:

> In our community women always take up more responsibilities 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 the land. Also, taking care of the little ones in the hut. But men are not like that. They spend a lot of time just doing nothing or wandering about in the forest. These days they waste their time on shop verandahs. They will just go on squatting there. They have become very lazy with easy access to toddy and arrack. Interference from outsiders has caused all this. Our men waste their time waiting for government projects or submitting applications. It was this same attitude that led us to lose our lands. Most of them lost their lands for a pinch of tobacco or a glass of tea or some arrack. Many in civil society and the Party have taken advantage of this. But this has not happened to women. Our community can surely grow only through the togetherness of our women. (46-47)

She says that women have actively engaged in the movement related to land rights, which will enable them to retrieve the other lost individual and collective social powers. The movements operated in Muthanga in connection with Adivasi land rights have displayed due to her people, especially women's leadership power and unity. The agitation raised slogans against the exploitation of and injustice to her land, its people, and resources.

She also criticizes the government and politicians for not properly addressing indigenous issues and reveals how much her people, especially women, are exploited sexually, economically, and socially by them in the name of supporting Adivasi people and their welfare. Janu describes the condition of Adivasi women: "Like people from civil society, even the workers from the Party created many problems for the women in our community. Quite a few women in Thrissileri and Thirunelli gave birth to the babies of Party men. There are hundreds of children whose fathers' names do not appear in the records" (35). She asserts that there is no difference in the treatment of tribal women by the civil society and political parties, and adds that the party is equally responsible for changing the identities of her women from custodians of culture to "unwed mothers" (35). Janu further reveals why they do not react against sexual exploitation: "There were many such women in Thrissileri who bore babies for a pinch of tobacco or a stone necklace or some food" (35). She accuses the so-called civilized society of tempting her people to use drugs to manipulate them. The land and its women are two sides of the same coin, and neither has value in the absence of the other.

Margaret Tucker agrees that the land is an essential factor in the process of evolving Aboriginal women's identity. In another sense, the development of land and a woman intersect and influence each other. The spiritual connectivity of the land and her people is delineated by Tucker in her life writing: "I feel that soon our ancestors won't even be a memory. Grand old various are buried there, the original pioneers of this country Australia" (12). She asserts that her people are the first inhabitants of the continent and its real owners. Hence, they should be the custodians of the land. The nature of possessing a land by the Aborigines is different and she reminiscences

how her people protected and took care of their land in ancient times. As they have lived there for centuries, her people know more about the features of the land than outsiders. They realise the uniqueness of their traditional land, decipher the seasonal changes, and possess knowledge of the animals and plants, with their unique features.

It is through the memory lane of women of different generations that Tucker romanticize Aborigines' affection and feeling toward their traditional land. This fact is evident in her memories of her childhood days, when Tucker and her sisters explored and enjoyed the bush life in Australia:

> It was a never-ending wonder and joy travelling by buggy through the bush and over the plains in those days, camping where there was water, If the weather was warm, just a mia-mia of fresh green gum branches put on the ground for the comfort of us pang gooks, a blanket spread over. I used to love those fresh gum leaves. I can remember it all as though it were yesterday. (68)

When Aboriginal children play in their surroundings, they unconsciously learn multiple aspects about their land and become aware of their close links to their Aboriginality. Tucker shares how her mother saved her sister's life when she was bitten by a highly poisonous snake. Her people know how to manage such emergencies and the skill that they acquired to overcome such challenges is gained from indigenous life experiences. Her ancestors were masters in hunting and farming: "As far as I can remember, the woman could hunt game as well as the men" (25). This statement reflects the gender privilege that women exercised in their community. Tucker adds that "when old people were hungry, they would pick up or borrow an old fishing line, or make their own. I have often seen the old people making their own fishing nets" (34).

They were not passive onlookers but keen observers of nature and their environment. Tucker claims that her identity as an Aboriginal woman is essentially connected to her land. She says that even during droughts, they could find alternative means of livelihood in their environment and fill their belly; the early Aborigines also knew the medicinal value of food and the plants that they consumed. Her mother would tell them that the flesh of Goanna, an animal found in

her land, would relieve body aches and arthritis. Tucker reveals that each Aborigine possesses a totem by which they are spiritually connected with an animal, a bird, or other creatures; they should avoid eating the animal concerned. Women in her community mainly possessed this traditional knowledge and passed it to successive generations. It is interesting to observe how her people enjoyed their Aboriginal food, which is eco-friendly by nature. She says: "The crays (we called them crow fish) were plentiful in that dam. We have learned to catch them in the right way, and it was great fun. They are delicious to eat" (26). These people followed a food chain that did not harm the environment.

As part of reclaiming the Aboriginal identity, Tucker observes that colonization uprooted Aboriginal Australians when it became a settler nation. Tucker vehemently criticizes the invaders: "The squatters brought their sheep, fenced their land, and the kangaroos and emus disappeared. Our food supply diminished" (45). She adds that when they were dislocated, they lost not only their place of belonging but everything connected to their Aboriginality. Her life at a training home and job as a domestic servant did not offer any recognition of the kind she had enjoyed in her homeland. She always had the urge to return to her land and its people as she felt complete only when she stayed with them and kept in touch with the environment. Her life at the Aboriginal training home was her most disgusting experience and her days were wasted inside its four walls, deprived of freedom or individual space. Aboriginal people are wanderers and they cannot live long without connecting to their place of belonging. Tucker made multiple attempts to escape from the place and complains that the instructions that they received from their white matron were a deliberate effort to eliminate the Aboriginal culture and substitute it with the white culture. She says:

> The descendants of those Aborigines no matter how light-skinned they now are, are of Aboriginal blood and have made the Earth richer in this land of Australia which God has given us all. There is plenty of room for everyone. Thank God for the spiritual heritage we have. That keeps me keeping on. I think of us all as one big tribe no reaching from Moonachulla, Moulamein, Lake Boga,

> Swan Hill, Robinvale, Echuca, Barmah, Cummeragunga, Mooroopna, Shepparton. There were no state boundaries before the white man came, and our people roamed far and wide. (32)

This passage elucidates how Tucker and her people enjoyed life and the places they travelled to as they identified the land as a collective resource. Their subsequent forceful displacement by the whites introduced hitherto unknown health issues to the Aboriginal tribes as explicated in the illnesses of her loved ones. These adversities may be attributed to the absence of traditional diets, connectivity to the land, and the drastic upheaval in their ways of living. As they had lived close to nature, Aborigines could not adapt to the new environment and lifestyle offered by the dominant class. It is a reality that should be considered while ascertaining the reasons behind the extinction of many Aboriginal groups in Australia following colonization. A place of belonging is not a sense of possessing land or space under one's control for individuals such as Tucker but an awareness of being whole and evolving as a full-fledged Aborigine. Though it is challenging for Aboriginal people to return to their tradition and culture, they find it more comfortable than assimilating into the white culture. Tucker's writing vehemently and repeatedly emphasizes this point.

As indigenous movements began in other nations, agitations for land rights commenced in Australia, and Aboriginal women engaged in the protests. As Janu did in Muthanga, Tucker actively engaged in civil rights movements related to land and Aboriginal sovereignty in Australia. She started her fight in the early 1930s and was the co-founder of the Australian Aborigine's League. The main goals of this organization were to demand their right to land and their right to vote. She believed that recovering their lost land could bring back the authority of women and the roles these women performed in their community.

Both in Aboriginal women's and Adivasi women's writings, the land is represented as essentially linked to their multiple roles within and outside the community, which extends the indigenous vision towards the earth and its significance. These women's indigenous vision is close to forest life for Janu and to bush life for Tucker. Though these two writers belong to different cultural strata and hail from di-

verse territories, they engage in dialogues that express similar concerns, and their sound vison endeavours to enhance the lives of contemporary indigenous people and shape indigenous female subjectivities. Janu and Tucker explicitly criticize the centuries of oppression that their people faced and seek redress for their grievances, both from the authorities and mainstream society.

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