

Voice of the Voiceless: A Study of the Loss of Language, Landscapes and Roots in the Context of Jacinta Kerketta's Poems

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Abstract

Literature of the indigenous tribes are always antipathetic, resistant micro- narratives from the margins that record their angst, anger, age old suffering, marginalisation and tales of resilience. A tribe refers to a group of indigenous people residing at a specific geographical location which provides them with all that they need for survival, from time immemorial. Tribal identities are variously named as 'aboriginal people', 'original inhabitants' or 'adivasis' at different places according to their geographical location and social ranking which makes them distinctive from others. Like the other tribal groups all over the world, the indigenous tribes of India are also rich in their culture, customs and folk traditions. However the swift undercurrents of industrialisation along with economic deprivation ultimately left them landless and rootless. Indeed they are facing the gradual but definite death of their distinctive cultural identities. This research paper aims to analyse the pain and trauma experienced by the indigenous people in the wake of the disappearance of their roots, landscape and language within the reference of Jacinta Kerketta's poetry. Jacinta Kerketta is a budding poet and freelance journalist who has been successful in articulating the existential fears and chaos of the Oraon adivasi community to which she belongs. A multi perspectival inquiry into the marginalisation and trauma faced by those silenced others has been adopted for this research paper.

Keywords

Marginalisation, indigenous tribes, tribal identities, silenced Other, cultural identities, social exclusion

Jacinta Kerketta is one of the promising voices of Jharkhand who has been successful in perceiving the emotions and rhythms of the Oraon tribe to which she belongs. She writes primarily in Hindi but her works are bilingual, with an English translation along with it. With an admirable mixture of rage, prayerfulness, irony and sometimes dark humour, she portrays the lived experiences and sagas of resistance of the dispossessed community. She belongs to the second generation of her tribe who got the privilege to receive formal education. The aesthetics of pain fused with empathetic affinity to the heart of the community, renders a universal appeal to her poetry. A lament on modern industrialization at the cost of exploitation of local resources and land, her poetry is also a shocking reminder of the large-scale ravage committed upon the global tribal community. Serving the worthy cause of preserving the rich world heritage and aboriginal value system, her works are important political, cultural and artistic documents of Adivasi worldview. Also they are testimonials of the violence committed on those disappearing landscapes, language and roots. She is also the author of two major poetry collections *Angor*(2016) and *Land of the Roots*(2018). She is conferred with The Voice of Asia Recognition Award (2014), Ravishankar Upadhyay Smriti Award (2015) and Aparajitha Award (2017).

The literature of the indigenous people, who are ever consenting to sacrifice their lives for the mammoth task of conserving the green and of providing viable alternatives, has never been adequately represented so far. Their literature is as distinct from the mainstream literature as they themselves are from the mainstream people. Though the constitution of India, a nation with around 700 diverse ethnic tribes, recognizes indigenous peoples' rights to land and self-government, under the 5th and 6th schedules, they are constantly subject to ruthless exploitation, deprivation and social exclusion even today.

Tribal literature in India is yet to acquire an identity of its own. Just like any other literary movement, the course and development of tribal literature was slow, often indiscernible and impacted by different

circumstances. Several historical and material elements contributed to the blossoming of contemporary Tribal literary movements, out of which, a cluster of novel movements led by women, Dalits and farmers were prominent . They believed that their continual exploitation owed much to their specific identities . With the aim of emancipating their communities from the forces of oppression, they joined hands with groups and communities with similar identities and their joint struggle came to be known as identitism. Later other socio-economic political and literary movements also expressed their consensus with their struggle. However the beginnings of the Contemporary Tribal literature in India can be traced back to 1991, in the face of the intense exploitation that was triggered by the onset of the new economic liberalisation and free trade policies of the government which in course of time, paved way to a wanton ransack of land, forests and resources. Thus tribal literature emerged as the manifestation of their resistance to the unwarranted interference of the intruders into their world.

During the early stages, the tribal Literary tradition was basically oral. Though pushed into the deep inner delves of the forests, tribal communities continued their creative literary pursuits . But as they were away from the centre and because their language too was an unsophisticated folk language, their literature too failed to attract the masses . Thus a large bulk of literature produced from outside the mainstream had to face a gross cultural neglect .

Jacinta Kerketta is one such representative poet who belongs to the Oraon tribe of Jharkhand, a state where more than ten lakh tribals have been displaced and pushed to a miserable existence in the metros, over the past decade alone. Kerketta has propitiously captured the emotions that run deep within the delves of their rich, diverse culture and has successfully recorded the feeling of everyday terror experienced by her people who are waging a perpetual battle against the land mafias and mining giants. The unanticipated loss of their cherished rivers, forests and hillocks left them in extreme trepidation which became habitual in due course..In this context, of everyday terror , Kerketta expresses her deep wish to become the poet of the people who are struggling for water, land, forest, identity, integrity and language. Both her collections *Angor* and *Land of the Roots* are

fundamental records of eco-centered writing which are also sagas of the epic struggle of the socially excluded and the dispossessed. According to Kerketta, human beings constitute just one segment of Nature and hence they can take only that amount of natural wealth earmarked for them. In this respect, the mainstream culture is different from that of the indigenous people whose acts are rooted in empathy and care. They believe that every individual shares an umbilical connection with Nature. In their perception, there are no lines of demarcation that separates human beings and Nature as two distinct entities. Kerkatta has succinctly represented this inextricably intertwined existence of humans and Nature in her poem, “In the Navel of Mother”:

Earth,
I seek
That place
Where had been buried
My umbilical cord.(1-4)

Just like in many other tribal communities, in her community too when a child is born, the umbilical cord is buried at the main entrance of the house, as they believe it to get the baby anchored to its place of birth. This providential act of burying the umbilical cord deep within the mother earth, establishes a solid connection between the child and that place. This act stands as a metaphor for man's inherent connection and sense of belonging to the place he belongs to. Man should drop out of modern life and seek to renew the self by returning to Nature. Every time and age shall ultimately return to Mother Earth when the realisation that life for one is life for the other and death for one is death for the other, strikes in. This quest for the umbilical cord becomes identical with their quest for identity which reflects their sensibility of connectedness towards their land, waters and forests. This inseparable bond that the living beings share with the place it belongs to is beautifully encapsulated in “Every time and age /Seeks it's cords/ In the navel of Mother Earth” (18-20). However the consumerist culture of the contemporary mainstream society has shattered the peaceful co-existence of the wild and the tribes resulting

in extreme commercialisation of their natural habitat which is unethical and anti ecological.

It is important to point out that Kerketta's poems are also narratives of violence committed on Adivasis and Nature. A sense of loss and disappearance along with a quest for truth and identity dominates her works. In her poem, "Sahib! Pray, how will you Dismiss?", she poses a serious question towards the mainstream culture, that has always distorted the truth of the indigenous people:

Sahib!
Covert, disguised issues you may
In fancy rhetoric explain,
But what should happen if someday
A girl from jungle comes to the city
And reveals all truth in her poetry?(1-6)

The covert ways of mainstream culture that deliberately mask their dirty truths that are stained with shame and crime are called for an open challenge in her poems. This tendency to distort truth is always dominant in the mainstream culture and the obscenity of their language is never unveiled which is always present even in their gestures, and mannerisms. The disgusting reality behind the ugly perverted hands that falls on the clothes of the forest girl in the guise of 'search operations', shall one day be brought to light. A tribal voice speaking for the tribes, Kerketta articulates the insider's intervention by giving a candid account of the experience of everyday terror which is the truth of her community, through her poetry. She hopes that: "There will come a day/When every girl from the jungle/Will write a poem" (33-35).

There is always a conscious effort from the part of the mainstream culture to romanticise tribal culture, particularly their rituals, values and language which is largely due to the lack of perspective which becomes extremely pronounced in the stark contradictions in interpretation and meaning of certain values in both the cultures. In mainstream culture, love for an object is marked with extreme obsession for ownership, eventually leading to its ultimate destruction whereas the indigenous people's love for an object of Nature finds expression in the care they render towards it. For them, to love means

to preserve and the ways of destruction are unknown to them. In one of the lectures that she delivered at the East Side Freedom Library South Asia Seminar Series, she recounts a childhood memory where the women of her community would wait till dawn to collect the fallen Mahua flowers which were extensively used as a remedy for many ailments. They wouldn't dare to pluck those flowers, instead they would wait for the flowers to fall on their own, as they never wished to interrupt the natural courtship of the flower with the tree. The popular belief among their tribe is that when the flowers are allowed to remain on the tree for a whole night both the tree and flower become very happy. So the tribal women would wait for a whole night for the flowers to fall naturally and this act reflects a deep ecological thought calling for an eco centred and ethical living. The aborigines worship the rivers, the mountains and whatever natural elements they see around. The mainstream people, who are ready to peddle their honesty for economic gain and power fail to perceive the ways of the aborigines that are deeply rooted in care and empathy.

As tribal communities continue to be sites of prolonged violence and discrimination, their language and culture are not exceptions. Indigenous languages have been suppressed and undermined for ages, as part of non-indigenous intrusion and hegemony that penetrate our social fabric at dangerous levels. In India, there exists an alarming situation where great peril of extinction looms over a large number of indigenous languages. Other than being a means of communication, most of the tribal languages serve as emblems of their culture, knowledge and value systems. According to the findings of the People's Linguistic Survey of India, many Indian tribal languages are on the verge of linguisticide:

Tribal languages are a treasure trove of knowledge about a region's flora, fauna and medicinal plants. Usually this information is passed from generation to generation. However when a language declines, that knowledge system is completely gone. With the loss of language comes the loss of everything in culture and loss of solidarity, the loss of man himself (Mohanty).

In this context it is important to point out that Kerketta's works are bilingual. Though she never writes in kurukh, which is her mother tongue, she writes in Hindi, the language of the dominant culture, with an English version alongside. "I write in Hindi because I want to speak to the perpetrators of injustice and violence on my community in their own language. I write in their language so they will know what we think of them" (Kerketta). This is mainly because of her immense desire to lay bare the predicament of her people to the dominant culture. She wants to tell the tales of those butchered mountains, poisoned rivers and plundered forests of Jharkhand to the whole world through her writings. However Kerketta stresses on the choice of writing in one's mother tongue, for she believes that one has an obligation towards one's culture and language." I would prefer to write in my mother tongue, because my language has no word that abuses women. Strange it might sound, but a word like 'randi' in Hindi is treated with some empathy in my language. It means 'widow'. Yet, I need to write in Hindi" (Kerketta). Her deep anguish and vexation over the surreptitious slaughter of the indigenous languages and cultures get enunciated in her poems "Death of Mother Tongue" and "In Public Interest".

Distortion of identity is yet another major threat the indigenous people face, in the wake of the ugly politics of development. Voices of protest are silenced, thousands of dissidents interrogated and many labelled as naxals are incarcerated :

My pet dog was murdered
For the sole reason
That it had barked on seeing a danger
It was declared rabid
Before being killed
And I a Naxal
In Public Interest (1-7)

The insidious ways in which the nexus of politicians, miners and brokers conspire to dynamite away the magnificent landscapes of Saranda forest, to make concrete forests in the metropolis is aptly described in her poems "The Six Lane Freeway of Deceit" and "I Need an Occasion". The stealthy ways of these giant nexus of

politicians and corporates who are on the track of a congenial occasion to plant their strategies in the soil of the tribes get uncovered in the poem “ I Need an Occasion”. Their ravenous appetite to free the farmer’s hands of ploughs and weapons and to celebrate the martyrdom of the tribal farmer is rightly captured in the lines:

For from the seat in Delhi

His backyard appears rather blurry.

I shall have the jungle cleared.

For it comes in the way

Of my reaching there straight away

I shall free his hands

Of ploughs and weapons;

And then on his fields plant,

My own factories, my own arms

I shall celebrate both

His freedom and martyrdom-

All I need is the right occasion (20-31)

Invisible spectres of encroachment and forced eviction hover over the present scenario as tribal communities continue to be robbed of forest lands for the sake of industrialization and plantation forestry. The deep wounds gorged in the body of the resplendent forests of Saranda is a reflection of the unspeakable horrors of violence committed upon a community that continues to wallow in distress, as bureaucratic apathy and corporate violation of human rights, isolate and muffle their voices.

Hands Stained with blood,

Of a thousand slaughtered trees

Quietly washed themselves off stain

In the waters of Saranda.(1-4)

Her verses speak of the massive destruction of the rivers of Saranda that are poisoned with bauxite and iron. This vicious carnage of the trees and merciless pollution of the precious waters is an indicator of the complete annihilation of a community and of a world view. In this context it is important to note that Kerketta’s voice is genuine and authentic when she insists that the community is more important than the individual.

Though many from the mainstream have started writing about Adivasis, a lack of experience, perspective and language always permeate their writings. It is the need of the hour to write about the resistance sagas of the indigenous peoples as the violence committed upon them is on the rise. As they belong to the margin, they are prone to fall easy prey to the hegemony of mainstream culture. The binary relationship of the indigenous and the mainstream also needs to be studied extensively. Tribal literature is also literature of pain as it is connected to the heart of the author as well as to the community. This esthetics of pain has to be connected to the heart, roots, community and human nature in general. What Jacinta Kerketta writes about is not just the question of the forests of Jharkhand alone. It is about all such rich heritage sites, spread across the world, that are subject to massive destruction. It is sad to realise that urban spaces and spots of green are becoming too unfamiliar to posterity, as in Kerketta's poem "The River, The Mountain and The Bazaar":

Little Posterity ran on- we are 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.(1-5)

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