

**MODERNITY AT ARM'S LENGTH: STRATEGIC EXOTICISM IN
MOTHER FOREST: THE UNFINISHED STORY OF C. K. JANU**

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Abstract:

*This essay argues that the dissensual politics of *Mother Forest: The unfinished story of C.K. Janu* (2004), the life narrative of the famous tribal activist, stems from its strategic exoticization of the tribal subjects. The essay demonstrates that the register of the exotic enables the narrator to offer a critique of the hegemonic modernity in modern, rational terms while simultaneously placing herself (and her community) outside the ambit of modernity.*

Keywords: *Modernity, mother forest, C. K. Janu, strategic, exoticism.*

Drawing upon Pramod K. Nayar's (2014) argument that the figure of C. K. Janu as depicted in *Mother Forest* is that of a “knowing subaltern” who is self-reflexive and politically conscious (293, 300), it is proposed that the subject presented in the narrative is one that consciously 'performs' certain identities in order to further a political cause. While Nayar identifies a set of “eco-tropics”, a set of tropes that rooted in land and local culture, as strategies of protest in select Dalit and Tribal narratives (292), this essay focuses on the ways in which the register of the exotic enables the narrator to strategically place herself vis-à-vis the main stream modern society.

This argument hinges upon my informing assumptions regarding both the authorship and the readership of this text. As the wording of the opening paragraph indicates, this paper makes an argument about the *text* studied rather than about C.K. Janu, the supposed author of the autobiography. As Turner (2012, 335) has argued, the politics of *Mother Forest* cannot be attributed to C.K. Janu's authorial persona alone and that the roles of the numerous mediators have to be taken into account: In the first place, this text has its origin in a recorded tape of Janu's interviews with the amanuensis Bhaskaran who 'translated' it into a written text. This was translated into English by Ravi Shankar who, in his “Translator's Note”, acknowledges the role of a famous writer and the editorial team in shaping the final text (xii). As a result, the relative contribution of various 'authors' cannot be determined and hence all arguments made by this essay will pertain to the final English version as it exists, inclusive of its various paratexts. Moreover, the subjectivity forged in the text is that of Janu's tribal community and not just her individual self. Ravi Shankar has pointed out in his “Translator's Note” that Janu uses the Malayalam word “nammal” which can mean both “I” and “We” and that he was forced to choose the either one of the words based on the context (xi). Similarly Pramod K. Nayar has identified the “rhetoric of community” as one of key features of the text (2014: 298). As for the reader, it will be assumed that the target reader of the text is a 'modern' individual ie. someone who is a member of the civil society and who, to one extent or the other, inhabits the realm of modernity. Thus all the arguments made in this essay pertain to a tribal text mediated by various agents and which is conveyed to a mainstream 'modern' audience.

C. K. Janu, the Exotic Subject

According to Graham Huggan (2001), the exotic is “. . . a particular mode of aesthetic perception one which renders people, objects and places strange even as it domesticates them . . .” and exoticism is “. . . a kind of semiotic circuit that oscillates between the opposite poles of strangeness and familiarity” (13; emphasis in original). In other words, an exotic representation achieves two things

simultaneously: it introduces something or someone strange (the Other) to the reader (the Self) and ensures that the object or person is not rendered completely familiar and a certain amount of 'otherness' remains. Huggan further argues the possibility of strategic exoticism, "the means by which postcolonial writers/thinkers, working from within exoticist codes of representation, either manage to subvert those codes . . . , or succeed in redeploying them for the purposes of uncovering differential relations of power" (32). The contention of this essay is that *Mother Forest*, whose implied readers are 'modern' individuals, strategically employs the register of the exotic in order to render Janu (and the other tribals) as being simultaneously modern and non-modern. This enables the tribal subject to escape the pitfalls of both being reduced to the Other and of being assimilated into the mainstream modernity.

Previous discussions of the exotic element in *Mother Forest* have focused on the disempowering aspects of such representations. For instance, Antony (2014) has commented on the politics of the translation of the title. The Malayalam title can be simply translated as "the life story of C.K. Janu". Antony points out that the choice of the title "Mother Forest" which underlines the tribals' bond with the forest is an attempt to exoticize the tribals (200-1). The most obvious evidence for the exotic element of *Mother Forest* is the two narrative styles that the translator has adopted. In his "Translator's Note", Ravi Shankar explains that while translating the first chapter, he tried to capture the tone of Janu's spoken language by using uppercases only to indicate the stresses. "The first chapter was treated differently from the second, because I felt that it was closer to Janu's inner world, while the second was more polemical and belonged to the outer world" (xii). A close reading of the text suggests that the first chapter is hardly less polemical (Turner 2012: 337) and that towards the end, the second chapter also employs the narrative style of the former. Nevertheless, the comment implies that some aspects of Janu's persona are mysterious whereas some are more accessible to the modern society. Moreover, the first chapter has been composed in a narrative style that supposedly 'reveals' Janu's self to the readers but the unconventional narrative style ensures that she still remains the Other. Elen Turner's (2012) reading of *Mother Forest* discusses the translator's approach without identifying it as being exotic. Turner notes that "[t]he division of Mother Forest into two halves constructed as the unconscious, pre-modern, private, tribal childhood half and the rational, political, modern, public half parallels the traditional conceptual division of modern life into a feminised private sphere and a masculine public sphere of political rationality" (336). While Turner concedes that the use of conventional language in the second chapter will cause the text to be taken seriously (336), she argues that this division elides the fact that even the earlier period in adivasi history has been characterized by social and political turmoil caused by the intrusion of modernity (336-7). However, this division which Turner attributes to "the desire to give a voice to the adivasis and the mediation of that voice" (337) can also be understood as deploying the register of the exotic. By portraying Janu as a non-modern subject who has partially adapted modernity, the text is placing the tribal subject strategically vis-à-vis modernity. Such a subject position enables the tribal subject to 'write back' in a language a comprehensible to modernity without assimilating into the dominant order.

This essay's argument is not merely that these two chapters with their contrasting presentations of Janu as mystical and modern constitutes a system of exotic. It is further argued that there is a nuanced exoticization of Janu even within the rational discourse of the second chapter. The register of the exotic works in this section of *Mother Forest* by manipulating widely held perceptions on the rationality (or lack of thereof) of non-modern societies and further, the gendered nature of such perceptions.

Janu is depicted as approximating the modern 'Self' in that she deploys a rational discourse; however, she remains to be an 'Other' in that this rational discourse advocates a non-modern life style for the tribals. A rational self is a key element of the discourse of modernity (Ashcroft, Griffith and Tiffin 2001: 146) and by the same token pre-modern (or non-modern) societies are usually considered to be characterized by such features that are supposedly antithetical to rationality such as emotion, spirituality, mysticism etc (Skaria, cited in Turner 2012: 329). *When the speaker of the text makes rational arguments,*

it would familiarize her to the 'modern' reader because she is adopting their discourse. *Mother Forest* challenges tradition/modernity dichotomies as Janu's advocacy of tribal rights is based on rational claims. She argues that tribals should possess the lands not because they have a 'natural' right over it but because of two reasons: First, they have a prior claim over it, having occupied the land earlier. Regarding the tribals 'encroaching' upon a piece of land in Thrissileri, Janu says, "We did what we did *only* because we could no longer enter the place where our people had been buried for as long as we could remember" (39; my emphasis). Here, the legitimacy of tribal rights is predicated upon historical claims of occupancy and not upon any mystical link with the land. The historical perspective which gives importance to what really happened - is very much part of the discourse of modernity and is the obverse of the mythical perspective of the past which is present in certain non-modern societies (see Nandy 1995). Secondly, Janu claims that they have a strong link with the land because their relation with land is symbiotic and is marked by a pragmatic interdependency: Land is central to the tribal way of life because they knew how to cultivate the land and obtain livelihood from it (47). Similarly, the presence of tribals is necessary for the land as well because, when the land is left in the hands of civil society, it is not utilized properly and it becomes barren. The text narrates the bond between the land and tribals thus:

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)

This passage has been interpreted as being "quasi-spiritual" (see Nayar, 299). But it can also be seen as a logical conclusion of the symbiotic relationship outlined above. The tribals have a closer bond with the land than other societies *because* their ways of life are more dependent upon the land.

The paragraph that follows which describes the tribal lifestyle suggests that the relation with land has resulted in an alternate knowledge system:

We created a system of life for ourselves through centuries of *direct observation* of earth and Nature. . . . Though it did not conform to the needs of civil society, it was a system of life that was complete in itself. We could predict when winds would blow, when it would rain and when it would grow cold. We had the tradition of preserving food and drink for long time consumption, by *watching* when the leaves began to fall and when there were changes happening to Nature. (47; my emphasis)

The idea is that tribal cultures survived by observing and studying nature and not by divining things magically. While the system may not be based on modern science, it is still predicated upon sensory perception and can be termed rational and empirical. The rationality identified in these passages is meant to be more of a rhetorical feature rather than an epistemological one. That is, the rational arguments use a language that is familiar to the 'modern' readers and hence can help them understand the Other ie. C.K. Janu.

The system of exotic requires Janu to be rendered simultaneously being a familiar and a strange figure. This is achieved by the fact that while her method the rational arguments is familiar to modern societies, the conclusions that she arrives at are markedly non-modern: as the above discussion has demonstrated, she does not endorse a complete assimilation into the modern society. A crucial caveat must be offered here: even though, Janu believes that the condition of tribals have deteriorated because of the influences of modernity (32-33; 47-51), she does not advocate a complete return to pre-contact lifestyle of the tribal societies. She proposes a *selective return* to native traditions, a selection that she exercises not on the basis of emotional attachment but by logical arguments. The most telling example of this approach is her disapproval of the mainstream society's project of preserving tribal culture. She is vocal in her criticism of various academic projects that seek to study, preserve and celebrate tribal customs (49-50). She notes that the elements of tribal culture such as their songs, medicines etc. were a result of the lifestyle that they

used to follow and insists that they have no place in a different cultural scenario. She says, “They cannot exist in another system and it is not for the community to insist so” (49). Her view of culture is dynamic and she argues that tribal traditions should evolve with the times, “They should exist on their own, striking a balance with the changes that time brings about” (49). Though she expresses her respect and affection for her native culture, she often refuses to romanticize the tribal customs of the past. She thus refuses to accede to modernity's tendency to 'museumize' tribal culture. These qualifications of her view notwithstanding, she is convinced that tribals should not entirely succumb to modernity and that they should continue to “live and work close to the land” (55). Thus the subject presented in the text is one that uses rational arguments to selectively advocate a non-modern lifestyle and continues to be the Other. This positioning of herself vis-à-vis the modernity retains the minimal alterity requisite to retain the exotic overtones of her identity.

The otherness attributed to Janu always-already present in her image by virtue of the politics of representation of the first half is intensified by the text's portrayal of the gender relations. The text explicitly suggests that unlike in the modern civil society, tribal societies are female dominated. Ravi Shankar writes in the “Translator's Note”, “Perhaps the singular nature of her mission and the almost solitary position that she holds in this struggle is best illustrated by the incident that we witnessed during the night we spent in her hut” (x). He goes on to explain that when they suspected that wild elephants were wandering near the hut, the women in the hut assumed command and were ready to face them where as the men huddled together in a corner. Here and elsewhere in Janu's narrative (46), the text suggests that the tribal societies are different in that women take up the role of the leader. More significantly, the subject forged in the text is that of a *rational tribal woman* and in this process, the text challenges the association of masculinity with rationality and the consequent implication that women lack rationality. This dichotomy is related to the tradition/modernity binary as the latter is also gendered. The reference is to the common stereotypical perspective wherein modernity is considered to be masculine whereas tradition is considered to be feminine. Janu counters this binary by suggesting that tribal men are gullible as opposed to the rational mindset of tribal women. At more than one point in the narrative, Janu says that tribal men are easily swayed by the various charms offered by the civil society such as liquor, tobacco etc and that they often gave away their lands in exchange for such trifles (44; 53). But Janu claims, tribal women are different, “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” (53). Though Janu does not specify what that “something” is, I would argue that the pejorative use of the word “meaninglessly” implies that the special quality is the capability for logical reasoning. The text thus implies that as opposed to the tribal men who have succumbed to the charms of the civil society women have not. Hence, when Janu immediately goes on to say, “It is among our women that our traditions and the way we dress live on even now” (53), it need not be interpreted as a blind adherence to past traditions. Thus the subject presented in the text the tribal woman is familiar in that she is rational but remains an 'Other' in her rational (as opposed to mystical) rejection of modernity and her challenging of the stereotype of the irrational (tribal) woman.

Conclusion: Strategic Exoticism and the question of Intention

It is argued that the subject presented in *Mother Forest* is one which has simultaneously been rendered familiar and strange to a 'modern' reader, and that this subject position enables the narrator of the text to offer a rational critique of modernity without assimilating into its hegemonic social order. What remains to be established is that this positioning is strategic and that it has significance as a method of protest. Pramod K. Nayar (2014) has analyzed this text in the light of human rights discourses and has argued that Janu is a 'knowing subaltern' who is “self-reflexive and politically conscious” and is “conscious of various forms of oppression” (293, 300). Nayar's argument is that Janu is thus a “reasoning subject” who is able to evoke a moral economy and expose the current social systems as unjust and to make

an ethical claim for human rights through forms of rhetoric that are linked to the ecosystem (300). His argument centers on Janu's consciousness of various political and legal discourses. One can build upon this insight and argue that the speaking subject of the text (which is an effect rather than the 'author' of the text and need not correspond with historical individual C.K. Janu) is one which is conscious of the politics behind the rational and gendered selves that is being attributed to her.

The problem with all arguments that attributes 'strategic' tactics to texts/authors is that they bear the burden of proving intention. Thus the exotic image of Janu can be termed "strategic exoticism" only if one can establish that the writers have deployed the exotic register in order to subvert the power relations (*see* Huggan 2001: 32). This can be achieved by proving that the text 'performs' various identities for the sake of subversion. A case in point would be the fact that the premodern innocence attributed to Janu in the first chapter throws up a dissembling figure that offers a sly critique of mainstream modernity. Throughout the text, Janu criticizes the Communist Party of India (Marxist) and accuses them of exploiting the tribal vote bank while secretly colluding with the feudal landlords (34-35). Towards the end of the first chapter she says that several tribal men and women were taken for a political rally and "there was a huge picture of a man with a beard" (27). The reference, of course, is to a portrait of Karl Marx. It is a given that, by the time Janu narrated this story to Bhaskaran, she would have been well aware of that fact, having worked for the Communist party for several years. There are other instances where Janu describes the pictures of M.G.R., Nehru and Gandhi without seeming to realize who they are (18). These claims lack credence, given Janu's (the real, historical individual) long engagement with mainstream politics. Such anecdotes can be understood as a strategy adopted to indicate the tribals' distance from the modern society. One can take such instances as a proof of the text's conscious performance of certain identities and speculate for all arguments regarding intentions are speculative that the text exoticizes Janu in order to maintain this distance. The subject of the tribal activist needs to speak the language of modernity in order to further the political cause of the tribals. The register of exotic enables her to do this without assimilating into the mainstream modern society.

In conclusion, it should be stated that the interpretation offered above is predicated upon certain assumptions and one can obtain different meanings if the text is read from the vantage point of, say, a non-modern reader. Then again, that would be a different 'text' altogether, for as the prescient Roland Barthes has pointed out, "*the Text is experienced only in an activity of production*" (1977, 157; emphasis in original) and each reading produces a different text.

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