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Enacting Female Agency: Subaltern Resistance in *Adimamakka*

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Abstract: The Malayalam autobiography *Adimamakka* by C. K. Janu constructs feminine agency as a form of collective and strategic praxis aligned with the transnational feminist critique of the victimisation of Third World women articulated by Chandra Talpade Mohanty and her insistence on historically situated solidarities. Reading *Adimamakka* as a counter-archive of subaltern life, this paper argues that Janu challenges liberal notions of agency that privilege individual autonomy. Instead, she presents agency as a material struggle for land, livelihood, and dignity through literacy campaigns, anti-alcohol mobilisation, and land-based insurgency culminating in the 2003 Muthanga occupation.

The article reveals the contradictions of Kerala's so-called progressive developmentalism through its documentation of Adivasi dispossession, gendered violence, and the criminalisation of forest-based subsistence practices. Janu integrates gender liberation with Indigenous environmental justice by conceptualising the forest as kin and ecology as sovereignty while resisting statist conservation policies and party patronage structures. The study contributes to transnational feminist and ecofeminist scholarship by demonstrating how *Adimamakka* transforms autobiography into insurgent archive, testimony of slow violence, and a demand for restoring land as culture.

Keywords: Adivasi resistance, feminist political ecology, life writing, female agency, subaltern praxis

1. Introduction

Debates on female agency in feminist theory have traditionally revolved around a tension between understanding agency as individual choice within existing social structures and recognising it as collective struggle capable of transforming those structures. Transnational feminist interventions, particularly those developed by Chandra Talpade Mohanty, repeatedly challenge both the liberal tendency to equate agency with personal autonomy and the colonial tendency to represent Third World women as a homogeneous category defined by oppression. Mohanty argues that women's agency becomes visible only when women are examined as historically situated subjects acting within and against multiple structures of power rather than as members of a universalised category ("Under Western Eyes"; *Feminism without Borders*).

This shift is especially important in contexts such as Kerala, where narratives of state welfare, literacy, and political modernity coexist with the systematic marginalisation of Indigenous and caste-oppressed communities. Janu's self-narration traces a trajectory from childhood bonded labour and forest-border precarity to political consciousness and collective mobilisation, culminating in Adivasi agrarian movements that challenged Kerala's developmental self-image. Her account presents gendered violence, police repression, dispossession, and political betrayal not as background misfortune but as structural conditions shaping resistance itself.

Rather than framing empowerment as an individual ascent, *Adimamakka* foregrounds communal survival and insurgent organisation through literacy programmes, anti-alcohol campaigns, village-level mobilisation, and land occupations. This paper argues that the autobiography operationalises Mohanty's framework by presenting agency as collective praxis emerging at the intersection of patriarchy, state power, caste hierarchies, and ecological dispossession. Agency here is not an internal attribute or symbolic declaration but a series of material practices that contest domination over land, labour, and life-worlds.

The text also articulates an Indigenous environmental ontology in which forest kinship is not metaphorical but political: the forest functions as sustenance, memory, and community reproduction while remaining threatened by developmentalist eviction and conservation regimes. Such a framework aligns with feminist political ecology, which insists that gender–environment relations cannot be analysed outside property regimes, divisions of labour, and institutional power (Agarwal, "The Gender and Environment Debate"; Elmhirst).

This analysis therefore approaches autobiography as an alternative archive. Subaltern studies scholars have demonstrated that elite historiography frequently erases subaltern political rationalities or absorbs them into dominant narratives of nation and progress (Guha and Spivak). In this sense, *Adimamakka* is not merely a narrative about struggle but itself a site of struggle. It records the slow violence of

dispossession and foregrounds the everyday sustaining labour—especially women's labour—on which insurgency depends (Nixon). Reading Janu through Mohanty, intersectional feminism, and feminist political ecology, this paper argues that subaltern resistance in Kerala reshapes feminist theory through its emphasis on land-based sovereignty and collective restoration.

2. Literature Review

Scholarship relevant to *Adimamakka* emerges from five overlapping areas: transnational feminism and agency; intersectionality and gendered violence; subaltern studies and counter-archives; feminist political ecology and ecofeminism; and life writing and translation as political mediation. Together, these frameworks make it possible to read Janu's narrative as both testimony and theory, positioning autobiography as a site where subaltern political knowledge is produced rather than merely represented.

2.1 Transnational Feminism and the Problem of Agency

Chandra Talpade Mohanty's critique of Western feminist discourse remains foundational for reading texts such as *Adimamakka*. In "Under Western Eyes," Mohanty argues that dominant feminist frameworks often construct a singular, ahistorical figure of the "Third World woman" as oppressed, culturally constrained, and passively suffering. Such representations sustain Western epistemic authority while obscuring the historical and material specificity of women's struggles. In *Feminism without Borders*, Mohanty further redefines solidarity as a political relation grounded in shared historical conditions and collective struggle rather than sentimental universalism.

These interventions enable a reading of Janu's narrative that rejects both cultural essentialism and liberal individualism. Instead, *Adimamakka* foregrounds the material conditions—land alienation, labour exploitation, and institutional violence—through which Adivasi women organise collective resistance. Agency in this context emerges not as personal autonomy but as historically situated political practice.

2.2 Intersectionality and Institutional Violence

Although intersectionality emerged from specific legal and political contexts in the work of Kimberlé Crenshaw, it remains analytically powerful for understanding gendered violence shaped by overlapping structures of domination. Crenshaw demonstrates that institutional frameworks frequently fail to recognise compounded vulnerabilities produced at the intersections of race, gender, and class.

In the case of Adivasi women, violence often operates across institutional sites such as policing systems, party networks, and welfare bureaucracies, where protection remains unevenly distributed. Intersectional scholarship further emphasises that violence is structural rather than episodic, sustained

through entrenched social hierarchies and state practices (Cho, Crenshaw, and McCall; McCall). These insights enable the interpretation of sexual violence and surveillance in *Adimamakka* not as isolated incidents but as consequences of dispossession and marginal citizenship within overlapping regimes of power.

2.3 Subaltern Studies, Historiography, and Voice

Subaltern studies scholars have long argued that dominant archives frequently objectify subaltern populations rather than recognising them as political agents. Ranajit Guha demonstrates how elite historiography has appropriated or erased peasant and popular political practices, while Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak cautions that subaltern speech is often rendered legible only through frameworks that suppress its specificity (*Can the Subaltern Speak?*).

These insights support reading *Adimamakka* as a counter-archive that foregrounds Adivasi epistemologies, including forest knowledge, subsistence practices, and kinship relations. By challenging statist narratives that portray Adivasis as welfare beneficiaries or encroachers, Janu's autobiography asserts alternative political rationalities grounded in sovereignty, dignity, and collective survival.

2.4 Feminist Political Ecology, Ecofeminism, and Environmental Justice

Ecofeminist scholarship has long debated whether the relationship between women and nature should be understood symbolically or materially. Bina Agarwal critiques essentialist ecofeminism and instead proposes an institutional analysis of gender–environment relations grounded in rights, livelihoods, and resource access ("The Gender and Environment Debate"; "Participatory Exclusions"). Feminist political ecology extends this perspective by emphasising place-based power relations and the gendered organisation of labour and environmental access (Elmhirst; Gururani).

Environmental justice scholarship similarly connects ecological degradation to structural inequality and institutional power (Mohai, Pellow, and Roberts). These frameworks help interpret *Adimamakka*'s representation of the forest as a political economy of struggle in which conservation and development simultaneously produce dispossession. The labour of Adivasi women emerges as both indispensable to subsistence and systematically rendered invisible within state-centred environmental governance.

Ramachandra Guha's critique of the export of Western wilderness preservation models to the Global South further illuminates how conservation discourse can function as ecological imperialism by displacing Indigenous communities. Rob Nixon's concept of "slow violence" likewise explains how environmental displacement produces cumulative forms of harm that remain politically invisible until narrated as structured experience. Janu's autobiography participates in this critical tradition by linking forest eviction to hunger, cultural loss, and gendered precarity.

2.5 Life Writing, Testimony, and Translation

Life-writing scholarship emphasises autobiography as a genre capable of combining testimony, trauma, and political analysis. Sidonie Smith and Julia Watson conceptualise autobiographical narratives as culturally situated life stories shaped by relations of power and genre conventions. Leigh Gilmore further argues that structural violence frequently produces "limit cases" of autobiography that resist expectations of coherence or closure. These insights are particularly relevant to *Adimamakka*, whose narrative form reflects the ongoing nature of struggle rather than offering resolution.

Translation studies introduce an additional layer of complexity, since Janu's narrative circulates internationally through its English translation *Mother Forest* (Bhaskaran). Theorisation of translation as strategic foreignisation suggests that translation can preserve difference rather than assimilating subaltern texts into dominant interpretive frameworks (Kuriakose). These debates are crucial because subaltern narratives often enter global feminist circuits where experiences of suffering risk commodification. Reading *Adimamakka* through Mohanty's framework therefore requires attention to the politics of mediation as well as representation.

3. Methodology

This paper adopts a qualitative textual analysis to examine how *Adimamakka* constructs female agency as collective praxis. The methodology is interdisciplinary, combining close reading with theoretical triangulation drawn from transnational feminism, intersectionality, feminist political ecology, and subaltern studies.

First, the study undertakes a close reading of key narrative moments associated with the formation of Janu's political consciousness. These include her early experiences of labour and dependency, encounters with gendered violence and institutional coercion, participation in literacy and anti-alcohol campaigns, and involvement in organised land struggles. Narrative emphasis—what the text foregrounds, repeats, or leaves unresolved—is treated not merely as a stylistic feature but as a form of political and epistemological intervention (Smith and Watson). In particular, the text's refusal of narrative closure is interpreted as a formal representation of continuing insurgency rather than as an aesthetic limitation (Gilmore).

Second, the analysis employs Mohanty's framework of transnational feminism to interpret agency as strategic and collective rather than individualistic. This involves situating agency within material conditions such as land alienation, labour regimes, policing structures, and party patronage systems that simultaneously constrain and enable political action (Mohanty, *Feminism without Borders*). Rather than applying theory as an external interpretive template, the study approaches theory and text

dialogically, treating the narrative as a site that both engages and reshapes theoretical formulations of agency.

Third, the forest is analysed through the lens of feminist political ecology as an ecology of subsistence and social reproduction rather than as an abstract environmental object. Descriptions of foraging practices, ritual relationships, and communal ties are interpreted as forms of situated ecological knowledge embedded within political economy (Agarwal, "Participatory Exclusions"; Elmhirst). Nixon's concept of slow violence provides a framework for understanding how displacement is narrated as cumulative and normalised harm rather than as a singular event (Nixon). Ramachandra Guha's critique of wilderness conservation further contextualises these processes by highlighting how conservation and development discourses frequently legitimise displacement in the name of environmental protection (Guha).

Finally, the study draws on theories of access and property to conceptualise land not merely as legal title but as a network of social relations structured by political and economic power. Ribot and Peluso's theory of access is particularly relevant here, as it demonstrates how resource access is shaped by institutional arrangements that operate beyond formal ownership (Ribot and Peluso). This framework is especially applicable in contexts where Adivasi land claims encounter bureaucratic delay, administrative exclusion, and coercive policing.

One limitation of this study is its reliance on textual analysis rather than field-based interviews. However, autobiographical testimony is treated as a critical source of subaltern political history because of its epistemic value in documenting experiences and struggles often excluded from official archives (Guha and Spivak).

4. Results

4.1 Agency as Collective Praxis Rather than Individual Self-Fashioning

Throughout *Adimamakka*, Janu's political maturation emerges through relationships grounded in shared labour, communal life, and collective organising. Agency is represented not as an individual attribute but as the capacity to sustain long-term collective action through meetings, cooperative work, resistance to authority, and the preservation of community structures under conditions of pressure and dispossession. This representation aligns with Mohanty's argument that agency develops through historically situated struggle rather than abstract individual choice (*Feminism without Borders*). The narrative therefore redefines empowerment as a collective process shaped by material conditions rather than as a personal achievement detached from social context.

4.2 Gendered Violence as Institutional and Structural

Descriptions of sexual violence and police brutality in *Adimamakka* do not merely produce a narrative of victimhood; instead, they reveal the institutional structures that systematically render Adivasi women vulnerable. Intersectional analysis clarifies how gender oppression intensifies when combined with indigeneity, poverty, and state surveillance (Crenshaw; Cho, Crenshaw, and McCall). The autobiography portrays women not only as survivors but also as organisers who establish alternative support networks, campaigns, and committees that function as counter-institutions. In this way, agency appears as the creation of collective mechanisms of protection and political expression in contexts marked by institutional neglect and coercion.

4.3 The Forest as Kinship Ecology Rather than Wilderness

One of the most significant narrative strategies in *Adimamakka* is the representation of the forest as a maternal and relational ecology that sustains foraging practices, ritual life, and social reproduction. This perspective challenges state-centred discourses that frame Adivasi presence as encroachment. Rather than reproducing essentialist associations between women and nature, the text can be read through feminist political ecology as demonstrating how subsistence labour and ecological knowledge form the basis of community survival yet remain systematically marginalised (Agarwal, "The Gender and Environment Debate"; Elmhirst).

This representation also echoes Ramachandra Guha's critique of wilderness conservation models that displace Indigenous communities in the name of environmental protection. Within *Adimamakka*, conservation and development emerge as parallel languages of dispossession that simultaneously commercialise forests and criminalise subsistence practices. The forest thus functions not as symbolic landscape but as a political economy of survival.

4.4 Critique of Progressive Development and Party Patronage

A further finding of this study is the text's critical engagement with dominant narratives of development in Kerala and with party-based political patronage often associated with progressive movements. Rather than rejecting organised politics altogether, *Adimamakka* demonstrates how party formations frequently absorb subaltern energies without ensuring land restitution, producing recurring cycles of mobilisation and betrayal. Mohanty's warning against solidarities based solely on ideological alignment is relevant here: political alliances must remain accountable to material outcomes and shifting power relations (*Feminism without Borders*).

The narrative's movement toward autonomous organising through formations such as the Adivasi Gothra Mahasabha reflects a strategic feminist political intervention that rejects representational mediation and foregrounds self-governance grounded in gender equity and collective decision-making.

4.5 Autobiography as Counter-Archive and Insurrectionary Practice

Finally, *Adimamakka* functions as a counter-archive that challenges statist historiography by foregrounding everyday labour, memory, and collective struggle as sources of political knowledge. Its refusal of narrative closure reflects the ongoing nature of land struggles and aligns with subaltern studies critiques of elite historical frameworks (Guha and Spivak). Life-writing scholarship further demonstrates how autobiographical narratives transform trauma and memory into political testimony capable of generating alternative forms of historical knowledge (Smith and Watson; Gilmore).

In this sense, the autobiography becomes a mode of political communication through which previously silenced experiences acquire discursive visibility. Its structural incompleteness mirrors the unfinished character of land struggles themselves, reinforcing the text's role as both narrative record and insurgent intervention.

5. Discussion and Conclusion

Taken together, the findings of this study demonstrate that *Adimamakka* does not merely represent female agency but actively theorises it through lived political practice. This insight is significant because feminist scholarship has often oscillated between two interpretive extremes: either treating agency as a universal individual capacity detached from structural conditions or emphasising structural constraint to such an extent that subaltern women appear only as victims. Mohanty's intervention provides a way beyond this binary by insisting on historically grounded analyses of how women act within constraints while simultaneously transforming them ("Under Western Eyes"). Janu's narrative exemplifies this position by showing how agency emerges through collective organising—literacy campaigns, anti-alcohol movements, and land reclamation struggles—rather than through individual self-assertion alone.

One of the most important implications of this analysis for transnational feminism is the centrality of land to the formation of agency in *Adimamakka*. Liberal feminist frameworks frequently define empowerment in terms of education, employment, or personal autonomy. Although Janu's narrative emphasises literacy and political awareness, it repeatedly returns to land as the material foundation of life. Without access to land, gains in welfare or education remain precarious and dependency deepens. This land-based understanding of agency complicates celebratory narratives of the Kerala development model by revealing how statistical indicators of progress can coexist with the exclusion of Indigenous communities from meaningful citizenship. As Escobar argues, development discourse often legitimises intervention while concealing unequal distributions of its costs. Janu's autobiography makes these costs visible by linking dispossession to hunger, alcoholism, family fragmentation, and gendered vulnerability.

The ecofeminist dimension of *Adimamakka* further reconfigures established theoretical debates about the relationship between women and nature. While the narrative's description of the forest as a maternal ecology may initially appear to reproduce essentialist associations between femininity and nature, it can instead be read through Agarwal's materialist critique of ecofeminism and feminist political ecology as a political argument grounded in labour, knowledge, and social reproduction (Agarwal, "The Gender and Environment Debate"; Elmhirst). The forest becomes kin not as metaphor but as lived relation: a site of subsistence, ritual practice, and collective survival. When conservation regimes criminalise gathering practices and displace forest communities, they do not merely alter environmental access but restructure gendered life-worlds. In this respect, *Adimamakka* articulates an Indigenous environmental justice perspective in which ecology and sovereignty are inseparable, extending environmental justice scholarship that links ecological degradation to structural inequality (Mohai, Pellow, and Roberts).

The temporal structure of dispossession represented in *Adimamakka* can be further understood through Rob Nixon's concept of slow violence. Adivasi marginalisation is not limited to spectacular moments of repression at protest sites but unfolds gradually through nutritional deprivation, erosion of livelihoods, bureaucratic exclusion, routine policing, and the disruption of land-based cultural practices (Nixon). Within this framework, autobiography functions as a medium that renders slow violence politically legible. Narrative becomes not simply representation but an active component of resistance, aligning with life-writing scholarship that understands testimony as political intervention rather than personal confession (Smith and Watson; Gilmore).

Subaltern studies perspectives also reshape how history itself is conceptualised in relation to *Adimamakka*. By foregrounding Indigenous epistemologies and everyday subsistence labour, the narrative rejects statist categories such as encroacher, beneficiary, or primitive and replaces them with a political vocabulary of sovereignty, dignity, and communal restoration. Spivak's warning about the mediation of subaltern speech remains relevant here: even when subaltern voices become audible, they are frequently translated through interpretive frameworks that reshape their meaning. The circulation of Janu's narrative in translation as *Mother Forest* therefore highlights the importance of attending to the politics of mediation in the global reception of subaltern testimony (Bhaskaran; Kuriakose). Such texts must be read within a Mohanty-informed framework that resists extracting universal feminist lessons at the expense of the material demands for land restitution that structure the narrative itself.

Adimamakka does more than illustrate Mohanty's theoretical insights; it contributes to redefining agency as a collective and land-based political practice. The narrative advances an Adivasi political ontology in which reclaiming land becomes cultural revival, reclaiming forests becomes ecological belonging, collective governance becomes feminist strategy, and autobiography becomes a sustained mode of insurgent intervention. The unfinished character of the narrative underscores the continuity of

struggle and suggests that feminist theory must remain accountable to ongoing movements rather than providing reassuring conclusions. To avoid reproducing the hierarchies that transnational feminism seeks to dismantle, texts such as *Adimamakka* must be recognised as sites of theory-making in their own right—material, insurgent, and historically situated.

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