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Living Traditions: The Evolving Nature of Indigenous Storytelling through Jacinta Kerketta's Poetry

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Abstract:

This paper will interrogate the nature of evolved phase of oral storytelling which is now recorded and expressed in written texts as well within indigenous communities, challenging conventional distinctions between truth and fiction. Often regarded as "truth" rather than mere myth, indigenous stories serve as valid guides to reality, embodying a worldview where truth is seen as nuanced and multifaceted. Oral traditions are inherently dynamic, with each retelling bringing changes in details and voice while maintaining the core narrative. Similar shift in dynamics can be observed in different writers written narratives as well, where retelling brings changes in details but seeding the core narrative. This dynamic nature reflects a broader understanding of tradition as adaptable and evolving rather than static. Through the poems of Jacinta Kerketta, this paper will explore how indigenous writers celebrate and sustain this tradition of dynamism, continuously adapting their narratives to reflect contemporary realities. Additionally, the paper examines how these traditions, once primarily oral, have been transcribed into written forms, with Kerketta expressing them through her poetry. Her work exemplifies how indigenous artists honor this dynamism, providing a framework for understanding and appreciating indigenous aesthetics. The analysis seeks to deepen our understanding of how indigenous oral traditions, now captured in various narrative forms, encapsulate a living, breathing repository of communal knowledge and truth.

Keywords: Adivasidom, Adivasi/Indigenous Literature from Jharkhand, Adivasi/Indigenous Aesthetics, Indigenous Studies, Indigenous literature.



Indigenous storytelling is more than just a tradition; it's a living, breathing repository of cultural memory, wisdom, and knowledge that has evolved over countless generations. Historically, these stories were shared orally, serving as vital tools for preserving communal identity, guiding ethical behavior, and understanding the cosmos. This paper explores how these rich oral storytelling traditions within indigenous communities have transitioned into written forms, focusing particularly on the work of Jacinta Kerketta, a contemporary Adivasi poet from Jharkhand, India. Kerketta's poetry exemplifies the dynamic nature of these traditions, illustrating how indigenous narratives can adapt to modern realities while preserving their core essence.

For indigenous cultures, oral storytelling has always been a central way of living. It's through these stories that knowledge, values, and history are passed down from one generation to the next. Rather than being seen as mere myths, these stories are often regarded as "truth," offering a complex and multifaceted view of the world. The oral tradition is inherently dynamic; each time a story is told, it undergoes subtle changes that reflect the storyteller's voice, perspective, and the specific circumstances of the retelling. This flexibility allows oral traditions to stay relevant, adapting to the community's evolving needs and circumstances. This paper will explore and reflect upon how this evolving voice of the poet is not only expressing her traditional, cultural identity but also critiquing the dust of development which is being built under the graves of the indigenous people.

The shift from oral to written narratives represents a significant change in how these stories are preserved and shared. Writing, in many ways, fixes a narrative, giving it a sense of permanence that contrasts with the fluidity of oral traditions. However, indigenous writers like Jacinta Kerketta have shown that even in written form, these stories can retain their dynamic nature. By incorporating the fluidity of oral traditions into her poetry, Kerketta continues the tradition of storytelling as a living, evolving practice. Here my argument, contradicts the popularly believed notion of 'the death of the oral narrative' once it is preserved through printed pages or digital representation. Derrida says, language is inherently unstable and lacks a fixed, stable meaning. He argues that the spoken word, oral language, precedes and underpins written language, and that the written language, and that the written words are a representation of the spoken word. Derrida's theory challenges the traditional view that written language is the primary and more authoritative form of communication, and instead emphasizes the significance of oral language in shaping and



informing written texts. Kishani also states that literacy modifies orality, but it does not and cannot annihilate it (68).

Jacinta Kerketta, an Adivasi poet and writer from Jharkhand, India, has become a powerful voice in contemporary indigenous literature. Her work is deeply rooted in the oral traditions of her community, yet it also engages with the challenges and complexities of modern indigenous life. Through her poetry, Kerketta bridges the gap between oral and written forms of storytelling, creating a body of work that honors the past while speaking to the present. In one of her interviews to 'The Hindu Lit for Life' (2019), Kerketta points out that tribal poetry is mostly meant to be oral; recited at different sites of protest and is intrinsically associated with the politics of representation and the construction of discourse. Such discourse contests the various nodes of power and hence allows the mainstreaming of these "words of memory" or the "poetry of disappearing landscapes". (Kerketta 25 February 2019).

Kerketta's poetry is known for its evocative imagery, rhythmic language, and deep connection to the natural world—elements central to Adivasi oral traditions. Her poems often draw on the myths, legends, and folktales of her community, reinterpreting them in ways that address contemporary issues such as land rights, environmental degradation, and cultural survival. In doing so, she demonstrates that indigenous storytelling is not static but constantly evolving to meet the needs of the present. Most critics argue that when these poems are put in print or on a digital platform, the organic form and sense of the entire performance is lost and call it as "the nostalgic 'world we have lost'" (Finnegan. *What is Orality- if Anything?* 146); thus, degenerating the verses into visual representations alone. However, I contend that such processes of textual preservation have within them the possibilities of performative assertion too. It need not be just read as a cry for the distorted culture-hood, rather it should be seen as a critic of the development which acted as a monster in place of an enhancer of the livelihood for the indigenous people.

One of the central arguments of this paper is that the distinction between oral and written narratives is not as rigid as it might seem. While writing introduces a new dimension to storytelling, it does not necessarily disrupt the continuity of oral traditions. Instead, it can be seen as an extension of these traditions, providing a new medium through which stories can be told, preserved, and shared. This paper also aims to guide the readers through the self-representation of the indigenous identity with the poems of Jacinta. As Jacinta Kerketta also exclaims that she has



witnessed numerous instances where tribals have been denied presenting their original voices as non-tribals workers has used that space in name of activism and social work (Kerketta April 7 2023). It might be a tiny yet vibrant step of such a move in that direction.

In Jacinta Kerketta's work, we see a testament to the adaptability of indigenous storytelling. She infuses her written work with the rhythms, repetitions, and symbolic language characteristic of oral traditions. By doing so, she preserves the essence of these stories while allowing them to evolve in response to new circumstances. This approach challenges the conventional binary between oral and written narratives, suggesting that they exist on a continuum rather than as opposing forms.

Through Kerketta's poetry, the living tradition of indigenous storytelling continues to thrive, adapting to contemporary realities while remaining true to its roots. This entire approach of Jacinta, with dialogue with the present while holding the past reflects the conceptual notion of Adivasidom, the lens through which this paper will showcase its essence in her works. Adivasidom refers to the collective identity, culture, and socio-political consciousness of Adivasi (indigenous) communities in India. It encompasses their distinct ways of life, traditions, languages, and customs, shaped by a deep connection to the land and nature. Adivasidom also highlights the struggles for land rights, autonomy, and recognition of indigenous rights within the broader framework of Indian society, reflecting the historical experiences of Adivasi communities, including colonization, displacement, and marginalization. It represents their resilience and efforts to preserve cultural heritage and assert their rights in the face of ongoing challenges. The ideology of Ram Dayal Munda or Jaipal Singh Munda since Jharkhand Movement which sprouts from the Adivasi consciousness framing the Adivasidom upon which their personal and political lives thrived. Tracing the essence of Adivasidom in present time through contemporary literature of Jacinta, I argue to propose this exclusivity of consciousness that indigenous people hold, that is, Adivasidom, should be addressed and spaced within the main stream academia, rather placing and limiting it in the subcategory of indigenous literature only. Hence, I would say, exclusivity need not be always placed in exclusion, it's as crucial part as the main stream discourse. Jacinta being a contemporary poet need not limit to fall under the indigenous poet from Jharkhand only, rather her voice should be equally spaced under the main stream poets of present times.



The poems which I will be analyzing in this paper are, “Care”, “Land of the Roots”, and “The River, The Mountain And The Bazaar”. Let's introspect Adivasidom through Jacinta's poetries-

Care

Mother,

Why do you scour the jungle,

Climb over hills all day,

And come home late

With a load of wood- just one bundle?

In reply Mother says, I scour the woods,

Climb over hills,

Wander the whole day

For dry firewood- just one bundle-

As I'm wary of cutting a living tree,

Out of care for my jungle.

The poem "Care" by Jacinta Kerketta serves as a poignant example of the evolving nature of indigenous storytelling, particularly through the lens of Adivasi culture. In just a few lines, the poem encapsulates the deep, symbiotic relationship between the Adivasi people and their natural environment, while also reflecting on the shifts that occur when such traditions transition from oral to written forms.

The poem begins with a question from a child to their mother, inquiring about the reasons behind her arduous daily journey into the jungle. The mother's response is revealing: she collects only dry firewood, avoiding the act of cutting down living trees out of care for the jungle. This interaction captures the essence of Adivasidom, where every action is guided by an ethical code rooted in respect for the environment which can be also termed as the seed of Adivasi



consciousness which guides them in formulating a way of life. In Adivasi culture, the forest is not merely a resource to be exploited but a living, breathing entity to be protected and nurtured. The mother's cautious approach to gathering wood is emblematic of the broader Adivasi worldview, where sustainability and coexistence with nature are paramount.

This poem also reflects the dynamic nature of oral storytelling in Adivasi culture. Traditionally, such stories and teachings were passed down orally, ensuring that each generation understood their role within the natural world. The fluidity of oral storytelling allowed for adaptations to be made depending on the context in which the story was told, ensuring that the core message remained relevant. As these stories transition into written forms, as seen in Kerketta's poetry, they retain their core essence while also adapting to new mediums. The written word, while more permanent, still carries the rhythm and simplicity characteristic of oral tradition.

The poem's structure—its repetition, rhythm, and straightforward language—mimics the qualities of oral storytelling. The repetition of phrases like "scour the woods" and "climb over hills" not only emphasizes the mother's dedication but also mirrors the oral tradition's use of repetition as a mnemonic device. This ensures that the story remains ingrained in the listener's or reader's memory, just as it would in an oral setting. The simplicity of the language, devoid of any elaborate metaphors or complex structures, also reflects the accessibility of oral narratives, which are designed to be easily understood by all members of the community, regardless of age or education level.

Through the lens of Adivasi culture, the poem "Care" can be seen as a modern continuation of a long-standing tradition of environmental stewardship and respect. The mother's actions are not just practical; they are deeply symbolic, representing the Adivasi belief in the interconnectedness of all life forms. By choosing not to cut down living trees, the mother is adhering to a cultural and ethical code that has been passed down through generations, one that prioritizes the well-being of the jungle over immediate human needs.

In transitioning this oral wisdom into written poetry, Jacinta Kerketta is not only preserving Adivasi traditions but also adapting them to speak to contemporary audiences. Her work serves as a bridge between the past and the present, ensuring that these stories, and the values they convey, continue to resonate in a world where such wisdom is increasingly crucial.



The poem, "Care" exemplifies the evolving nature of indigenous storytelling within Adivasi culture. The poem encapsulates the core values of environmental respect and sustainability while demonstrating how these stories, whether told orally or written, adapt to new contexts while preserving their essential truths. Through her poetry, Kerketta ensures that the dynamic and tradition of Adivasi storytelling continues to thrive, offering valuable lessons for both present and future generations turning the tradition not a thing of past placed within the collective memory of the community rather making it thrive as part of day to day living and making it a living tradition, as D.P. Mukerji also state living tradition is the traditions were not only formed in the past but also kept on changing with the present and evolved over time. It manages to retain basic elements from the past.

Moving to the second poem-

Land of the roots

The sight of trees they cannot stand,

For the roots of trees- they claim land.

The poem "Land of the Roots" by Jacinta Kerketta, though brief, is a powerful reflection on the relationship between land, trees, and indigenous identity. Through the lens of Adivasi culture, the poem captures the tension between indigenous communities and external forces that seek to claim and exploit the land. This analysis explores how the poem reflects the evolving nature of indigenous storytelling, particularly within the context of Adivasi experiences and worldviews. This reflects the self-representation of the indigenous voice and their bond with nature. The outsiders view always tend to over romanticize the relationship the indigenous people share with nature. Here in this poetry, we can notice how it's not the romanticization of their relation with nature but how indigenous people are critically asserting their voices for their right and protection of their culture. As Xaxa points out in his work, "Tribes as Indigenous people of India", how scholars like Ghurye (1963) and Bose (1975), stressed the nature of interaction between tribes and the larger Hindu society reflects similarities between the two societies, contradicting to this notion Xaxa states, how similarities cannot be the parameter to fall the two societies as one absorbed within the other. The differences within these two societies also need to be looked at so that tribes can be recognized as an independent category. Another work of Ghurye, "The Abridges 'So-called'



and Their Future” he described tribes as Hindus and used the term “backward Hindus”. Thus, reflecting the outsider's worldview being used as the base for defining and understanding the indigenous lives. This is critiqued by Xaxa in his work, “Politics of Language, Religion and identity: Tribes in India”, as a voice of insider and their self-representation plays a crucial role in understanding and spacing the worldview of the indigenous community through them. Similar argument can be drawn from the work of Jacinta which reflects and represents, guiding to trace through the medium of literature produced by her in this paper.

As the poem decodes, in Adivasi culture, land is more than just a physical space; it is deeply intertwined with identity, spirituality, and survival. The trees and their roots symbolize this connection, representing the deep bond that Adivasi people have with their ancestral lands. The land is seen as a living entity, with the roots of trees symbolizing the connection to ancestors, traditions, and the community's collective memory. In indigenous storytelling, the land is often portrayed as a nurturing force, one that provides sustenance and serves as a repository of cultural wisdom.

The poem highlights a critical issue: the external forces that seek to sever this connection by claiming the land. The phrase "the sight of trees they cannot stand" suggests an aversion to the natural world, particularly as it exists in its undisturbed, rooted form. This aversion can be interpreted as a metaphor for the colonial and modern capitalist tendencies to exploit land for economic gain, disregarding the indigenous peoples' connection to it. “Even though the term tribe have been a colonial construction, the idea underlying it was not” (Xaxa, p 12). This puts light on the nationalist's conception of tribes which was not different from the Christian missionaries. Adding on how the indigenous people were double oppressed and double colonized, as the colonizers were not only the one who came from foreign land rather the people of the same nation also held the similar exploitative approach towards them which can be traced in Jacinta’s poetry as well. How they are forced to feel isolated within their own space.

Kerketta's poem is an example of how indigenous storytelling has evolved from its oral roots to a written form that still retains its core messages. Traditionally, Adivasi stories would be passed down orally, with each retelling adapting to the context in which it was told. In the written



form, this adaptability is still present, but it is now geared toward addressing contemporary issues such as land dispossession and environmental degradation.

The poem's brevity and sharpness reflect the urgency of these issues, signaling a shift in the function of indigenous storytelling. Where once these stories may have focused on the sacredness of the land and its role in community life, now they also serve as a form of resistance against forces that threaten to erase these connections. By writing about these themes, Kerketta ensures that the stories of her people are not just preserved but also made relevant to a wider audience, including those who may be unfamiliar with the nuances of Adivasi culture.

From an Adivasi perspective, the act of claiming land—particularly land that is seen as the home of the roots—represents an existential threat. The roots are not just literal; they symbolize the deep, ancestral ties that the Adivasi people have to the land. To claim the land is to attempt to sever these roots, to disrupt the continuity of culture and identity that has been maintained for generations.

Kerketta's poem reflects a broader narrative within indigenous storytelling: the defense of the land as a defense of identity. The land is integral to the Adivasi sense of self, and any threat to it is a threat to the very existence of the community. The poem's stark language—"they cannot stand," "they claim"—conveys a sense of invasion and violation, underscoring the aggressiveness of these external forces. This poem thus provides the evidence that these indigenous narratives are not mere reflection of myths but expresses the truth of their culture and a voice of assertion for its preservation. Thus, through the lens of Adivasi culture, the poem captures the deep connection between land, trees, and identity, highlighting the existential threats posed by those who seek to claim and exploit the land. In its written form, the poem continues the tradition of indigenous storytelling, adapting it to serve as both a preservation of cultural memory and a form of resistance against forces that threaten to sever these ancient connections.

Another poem which I am analyzing is,

The River, The Mountain And The Bazaar

It was a Sunday, and I



Holding little Posterity by the hand

Set out for the village bazaar.

Coming upon a narrow path

Amidst dry and withered trees,

I said to little Posterity,

Look, 'tis where the village river used to be.

A deep furrow in the ground ahead,

Swallowed all the mountains, I said.

Suddenly, struck by fear she held me tight,

A graveyard, vast and sinister, lay in sight.

I said to her, do you see?

'Tis where the barns of your ancestors used to be.

Little posterity ran on- We're 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 that wall, a piece of nature as well.

And why is the rain so dear, pray tell?

The shopkeeper said- This wetness is not of here!

It comes from another sphere.



Times are slack, have ordered just a sack.

Fumbling for money in the corner of my sari,

I untied the knot only to see

In place of a few folded rupees

The crumbled folds of my entire being.

Jacinta Kerketta's poem "The River, The Mountain And The Bazaar" is a profound reflection on the loss of natural landscapes and the erosion of indigenous culture, told through a narrative that intertwines memory, environmental degradation, and commodification. Through the lens of Adivasi storytelling traditions, the poem serves as a poignant commentary on the consequences of modernity and the commercialization of nature, while also illustrating the evolving nature of indigenous storytelling as it adapts to contemporary issues.

The poem is a striking example of how indigenous storytelling has evolved from its traditional oral roots to address contemporary realities. Historically, Adivasi stories were orally transmitted across generations, preserving the collective memory and wisdom of the community. These stories often emphasized the sacredness of the natural world and the deep connection between the land and the people. In Kerketta's work, this traditional form of storytelling is preserved but adapted to critique the destructive forces of modernity, globalization, and environmental degradation.

By transitioning these stories into written form, Kerketta extends their reach beyond the confines of the Adivasi community, inviting a broader audience to engage with these critical issues. The poem's narrative, while grounded in specific cultural references, speaks to universal themes of loss, commodification, and the disintegration of the natural world, making it relevant to both indigenous and non-indigenous readers alike.

The poem's central theme is the commercialization and loss of natural landscapes, which are depicted as integral to the identity and heritage of the Adivasi people. The river, mountain, and



bazaar serve as symbolic representations of this transformation. The river and mountain, once vibrant and central to the community's way of life, are now reduced to commodities that can be bought and sold in the bazaar. This commodification reflects the broader forces of capitalism and globalization that have encroached upon indigenous lands, transforming sacred natural elements into mere goods.

The poem begins with a nostalgic journey to the village bazaar, a place that once might have been a site of communal exchange and connection. However, the landscape has changed dramatically, with the river reduced to a "deep furrow" and the mountains swallowed up, symbolizing the irreversible environmental destruction that has taken place. The protagonist's explanation to "little Posterity"—a symbolic figure representing future generations—about the lost river and buried mountains emphasizes the disconnection between the past and the present.

Through an Adivasi lens, the poem highlights the deep sense of loss and disorientation experienced by indigenous communities as their lands are transformed. The reference to "the barns of your ancestors" underscores the connection between land and identity, suggesting that the loss of the land is also a loss of cultural heritage and memory. This connection is further emphasized when "little Posterity" is struck with fear upon seeing the "graveyard" where her ancestors' barns once stood, symbolizing the death of a way of life.

Towards the end of the poem, where the protagonist attempts to purchase natural elements—rain, wet earth, a river, and a mountain—from the shopkeeper, further critiques the commodification of nature. The shopkeeper's response that the "wetness is not of here" and the "times are slack" reflects the artificial scarcity and commercialization of natural resources, a direct consequence of environmental exploitation. The final image, where the protagonist finds "the crumbled folds of my entire being" instead of money, symbolizes the spiritual and cultural impoverishment that results from the loss of connection to the land.

Kerketta's use of language and structure mirrors the oral traditions of Adivasi storytelling, with a narrative that is both straightforward and layered with symbolic meaning. The dialogue between the protagonist and "little Posterity" serves as a didactic tool, imparting wisdom to future generations while also expressing a deep sense of mourning for what has been lost. The poem's



simple yet evocative language captures the stark realities of environmental degradation while maintaining a rhythm that echoes traditional oral storytelling.

"The River, The Mountain And The Bazaar" by Jacinta Kerketta powerfully portrays how indigenous storytelling has evolved to address the pressing issues of modernity while remaining rooted in traditional values and perspectives. Through the lens of Adivasidom, the poem critiques the commodification and loss of natural landscapes, highlighting the profound impact this has on indigenous identity and cultural memory. By adapting traditional storytelling forms to contemporary written poetry, Kerketta ensures that these stories continue to resonate and inspire both within and beyond the Adivasi community.

Drawing from the above analysis, the discourse of evolving storytelling of indigenous people also reflects their distinct practice of aesthetics. In general view, "Aesthetics, as here conceived, embraces not only the pursuit of beauty, including all artistic endeavor and its appreciation; it embraces as well all technique and craftsmanship" (Ogden, p505). The indigenous view on defining their aesthetics varies from the common notion of main stream understanding. For understanding the idea of indigenous aesthetics, one first need to understand their ideology of living, "While hierarchy exists within Indigenous cultures as part of the sacred order, humans are not placed above all else and are often assigned responsibilities for other life forms, animate and inanimate through relationships. These responsibilities are the guiding tenets that Indigenous cultures operate to fulfill, rather than the rights assigned by dominion." (Ahtone, p 1-2). Heather ahtone, also states, "distinct aesthetic systems have been in use for millennia and remain part of our cultural practices by contemporary makers. However, if one were to ask a cultural practitioner about the aesthetics of their culture, they might humbly reply that they don't know. This reply is not a dismissal of their knowledge, but a response to the Western cultural system that regularly parses out aesthetics from ritual practice." (p2). This respires the indigenous worldview and their concept of aesthetics which is distinct yet in harmony with the nature contradicting the imposed worldview of the outsiders about them being barbarians and demeaning them to subhuman strata. Their idea of perceiving aesthetics holds a bond of indignity, which can be reflected in their works, art and artifacts. Similar essence of aesthetics and seed of indignity can view in Jacinta's writing as well. Hence, let the vortex of consciousness find its resolution in the resonant lines of Jacinta Kerketta, where each word drips with profound truth-



“They are waiting for us to become civilized,
They are waiting for us to become civilized,
While we are waiting for them to turn human.”

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