

Ecocritical Degradation and Indigenous Resistance in the Poetry of Nirmala Putul

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Abstract

This paper examines the ecocritical dimensions in the poetry of Nirmala Putul, a prominent Adivasi poet whose works foreground the intimate relationship between indigenous communities and their natural environment. Drawing on ecocritical theory, particularly the ideas of Lawrence Buell and Cheryll Glotfelty, the paper analyses how Putul's poetry resists anthropocentrism, critiques environmental degradation, and articulates an indigenous ecological consciousness rooted in community, land, and identity. Through close reading of selected poems, the study highlights the intersection of ecology, gender, and marginality, demonstrating how Putul's poetic voice becomes a site of resistance against both environmental exploitation and socio-cultural erasure.

Keywords: *Adivasi poetry, indigenous ecology, environmental justice, ecofeminism*

Introduction

“The modern ecological consciousness has a feeling that the balance between human and the natural world must be maintained. A perfect ecology is one in which plants, animals, birds and human beings live in such harmony that none dominates or destroys the other” (Frederick). Indigenous communities across India are increasingly subjected to the adverse impacts of ecological degradation driven by mining operations, large-scale deforestation, and state-sanctioned development projects. These processes, often justified in the name of national

progress and economic growth, are deeply embedded in the logic of extractive capitalism, which prioritises resource exploitation over ecological sustainability and social justice. As a result, the natural landscapes that have historically sustained Adivasi life are being irreversibly altered, leading not only to environmental deterioration but also to the large-scale displacement of indigenous populations. Such displacement disrupts long-standing patterns of habitation and livelihood, thereby destabilising the delicate ecological balance that characterises these regions.

Situated at the critical intersection of developmental agendas and indigenous identity, Adivasi communities experience a profound rupture in their relationship with the environment. Their ways of life, which are intrinsically linked to the rhythms of nature, face systematic erosion under the pressures of industrial expansion and infrastructural development. The loss extends beyond material dispossession to include the fragmentation of cultural memory, traditional ecological knowledge, and community-based practices that have been sustained over generations. In this context, the indigenous conceptual framework of *jal* (water), *jangal* (forest), and *jameen* (land) becomes particularly significant, as it encapsulates a holistic understanding of life, livelihood, and belonging.

The disruption of this triadic relationship not only undermines the economic self-sufficiency of these communities but also threatens their cultural and spiritual existence. Rivers, forests, and land are not merely resources to be exploited; they constitute the very basis of indigenous cosmology, identity, and survival. Therefore, the ongoing processes of ecological destruction must be understood not simply as environmental issues but as forms of structural violence that marginalise and disenfranchise Adivasi populations, raising critical questions about the ethics and inclusivity of contemporary development paradigms.

Ecocriticism, as a critical framework, explores the relationship between literature and the physical environment. Emerging prominently in the late twentieth century, it challenges anthropocentric modes of thinking and emphasises the interconnectedness of human and non-human worlds. Lawrence Buell defines ecocriticism as the study of the relationship between literature and environment conducted in a spirit of commitment to environmental praxis, while Cheryll Glotfelty highlights its role in examining how nature is represented in literary texts.

Nirmala Putul was born on 8 March, 1972, into a Santhal family in Jharkhand. She did her schooling from Dumka, Dudhani and Kuruva. She writes in Santhali and Hindi and has published three poetry collections, *Nagaare Ki Tarah Bajte Shabda* (A Voice like Thundering of Drums) from Bhartiya Jnanpith in 2004, *Apne Ghar Ki Talaash Mein* (In Search of One's Own House) from Ramnika Foundation in 2004, and *Beghar Sapne* (Homeless Dreams) by Aadhar Prakashan in 2014. The collection of poems *Apne Ghar Ki Talaash Mein* is in Santhali and has been translated into Hindi by Ashok Singh. The other two collections are in Hindi. In this essay, all the translations of her poems are from Hindi to English and the translations are mine.

In the Indian context, ecocriticism acquires a unique dimension when applied to Adivasi literature, which inherently embodies ecological consciousness. Nirmala Putul, a Santhal poet writing in Hindi, presents a powerful voice that captures the lived realities of indigenous communities. Her poetry is deeply rooted in the landscape of forests, rivers, and rural life, portraying nature not merely as a backdrop but as an integral part of identity and existence. This paper seeks to explore the ecocritical perspective in Putul's poetry by analysing how her works articulate an indigenous environmental ethos, critique modern development, and foreground the inseparable link between nature, culture, and survival.

Ecocriticism and Indigenous Worldviews

Ecocriticism often engages with indigenous perspectives that challenge Western dualisms between nature and culture. Indigenous worldviews typically emphasise harmony, reciprocity, and sustainability. In contrast to capitalist modes of exploitation, these perspectives view land as sacred and communal.

Nirmala Putul's poetry exemplifies such an ecological worldview. Her poems frequently depict forests as living entities, rivers as nurturing mothers, and land as a source of cultural identity. This aligns with Buell's criterion that an environmentally oriented text must recognise the non-human environment as an active presence rather than a passive setting.

Furthermore, Putul's work resonates with Vandana Shiva's ecofeminist framework. It provides a critical lens through which Nirmala Putul's poetry can be meaningfully interpreted. Shiva's argument that the exploitation of nature and the oppression of women are interconnected is reflected in Putul's portrayal of Adivasi women, whose lives are deeply intertwined with forests, water, and land. In her poems, environmental degradation caused by mining, deforestation, and development projects disproportionately affects women, disrupting their livelihoods and everyday ecological practices. This aligns with Shiva's critique of "maldevelopment," which exposes how capitalist and state-driven models of progress marginalise indigenous communities while depleting natural resources. Furthermore, Putul's emphasis on oral traditions, ecological memory, and the sacredness of nature resonates with Shiva's advocacy for indigenous knowledge systems and biodiversity. Both foreground a worldview that challenges anthropocentric and patriarchal paradigms by recognising nature as a living, sustaining force. Thus, Shiva's ecofeminism not only helps contextualise the ecological concerns in Putul's poetry but also highlights the role of Adivasi women as active

agents of resistance against environmental and cultural erasure. ecofeminist concerns, where the exploitation of nature parallels the oppression of women and marginalised communities. Her poems often highlight how environmental destruction disproportionately affects Adivasi women, who are closely tied to natural resources for their livelihood.

Nature as a Living Presence

One of the defining features of Putul's poetry is the portrayal of nature as animate and sacred. In her poems, forests are not merely collections of trees but living spaces filled with memory, spirit, and community. The natural world is imbued with agency, reflecting an animistic worldview. Nirmala Putul's poetry is rooted in the culture and landscape of Santhali life. Her poems reflect a deep understanding of the integral connection between nature and Santali life. Literature, specifically poetry, forms the basis of representing the meaning of nature to the Santhals. The poem "If You Were in My Place" questions the developmental paradigm of mainstream society that privileges some and leaves others out. Putul asks pointed questions in this poem—

How would you feel?
if your village stood in the lowlands of distant hills
and you lived in huts of grass and straw
right next to oxen, cows, goats and chickens and pigs
the anxious light of lamps about to flicker out?
Forced to see the faces of
children whimpering from hunger
how would you feel?

(Translated from the Santali original by Arlene Zide with Pramod Kumar Tiwari and Nirmala Putul)

For instance, in several poems, trees are depicted as companions and witnesses to human suffering. Rivers are not just water bodies but lifelines that sustain both physical and cultural existence. This personification is not merely a literary device but reflects the lived reality of Adivasi communities, where nature is deeply integrated into everyday life. In the next three stanzas of the poem, the tone of the poem becomes sharper and more critical. She asks what if she was “sitting on a chair” and

your hands clutched politely
begging for some work,
wheedling and whining
in your sick little language? (Putul)

She then asks what if you were being gazed at and exploited by someone else. Putul's questions are to the advocates of the developed world who have completely ignored the indigenous tribes like hers. She asks what if she was at the beginning of the line and “you” at the end? The physical features of the Santali are brought into question next:

if you were black and your nose was flat,
the soles of your feet full of cracks? (Putul)

She asks how it would feel if you had these features and were mocked at for them. Such representations challenge anthropocentric perspectives and emphasise the intrinsic value of the non-human world. By foregrounding nature's agency, Putul aligns her poetry with ecocritical principles that advocate for a more inclusive understanding of ecological relationships.

Critique of Development and Environmental Degradation

A central theme in Putul's poetry is the critique of modern development and its destructive impact on indigenous landscapes. Industrialisation, deforestation, and mining are portrayed as forces that disrupt the ecological balance and displace communities.

Putul's poems often depict the loss of forests and the consequent erosion of cultural identity. The destruction of natural habitats is not only an environmental issue but also a socio-cultural crisis, leading to displacement, poverty, and alienation.

Don't marry me in far location

Where you have to sell the goats of the house to come and meet me.

Don't marry me in a country where there are more Gods

Than woman men.

Don't fall in love where there are no forests, rivers and mountain.

I will definitely not marry there,

Where the roads are faster than human beings. (Putul, "Don't Marry Me in Far Location", 73)

In this poem of Putul, the poetess argues not to get married far from the jungle. The jungle is the soul atmosphere where she is accustomed to living freely, without any artificiality. The towns are full of fake people lacking emotions, showing off their artificiality. Her poetic voice becomes a form of resistance. By documenting the lived experiences of Adivasi communities, she exposes the violence embedded in development narratives. This aligns with environmental justice perspectives that highlight the unequal distribution of ecological harm.

Intersection of Ecology, Gender, and Marginality

An ecocritical reading of Putul's poetry must also consider the intersection of ecology with gender and marginality. As an Adivasi woman poet, Putul brings a unique perspective that combines ecological awareness with feminist concerns.

If you are in my place
Just think, how would you feel if you were in my place –
And I was in yours!
How would you feel if your daughters had to fetch water from
Springs from miles away –
Were breaking stones
Or spreading bitumen on the road to light the stove at home
Or rushing to the market early in the morning
Carrying a wooden basket on their bicycle to arrange for salt and oil!
(Putul, "If you were in my Place," 280)

Her poems often depict the struggles of women who bear the brunt of environmental degradation. The scarcity of water, loss of forests, and displacement directly affect their daily lives and labour. In this sense, Putul's work can be read through an ecofeminist lens, which connects the domination of nature with the oppression of women. This poem by Putul explains the struggles of an Adivasi woman. She has to go far to arrange daily necessities like water, salt, and oil. The scarcity of water on Earth has a direct impact on Adivasi women; environmental degradation has doubled their toil in life, and their struggle for existence is getting tougher. Moreover, her poetry highlights the marginalisation of Adivasi communities

within mainstream society. The loss of land and resources is not merely economic but also cultural, as it leads to the erosion of traditions, languages, and ways of life.

Language, Orality, and Ecological Memory

Another significant aspect of Putul's poetry is its rootedness in oral traditions and indigenous linguistic practices. Her use of simple, evocative language reflects the oral culture of the Santhal community, where stories, songs, and rituals are closely tied to nature. This linguistic style serves as a repository of ecological knowledge, preserving the memory of landscapes and practices that are increasingly threatened. Through her poetry, Putul not only documents environmental change but also resists cultural erasure.

The emphasis on orality and memory aligns with ecocritical concerns about the loss of biodiversity and cultural diversity. By foregrounding indigenous knowledge systems, Putul's work challenges dominant narratives and offers alternative ways of understanding human-environment relationships.

Resistance and Ecological Ethics

At its core, Putul's poetry articulates a form of ecological resistance. Her works advocate for a return to sustainable practices and a recognition of the intrinsic value of nature. This resistance is not merely oppositional but also constructive, as it proposes an ethical framework based on coexistence and respect. Her poems call for a rethinking of development paradigms and emphasise the need for ecological balance. In this sense, Putul's poetry contributes to contemporary environmental discourse by offering a perspective that is both critical and hopeful. It underscores the importance of listening to marginalised voices in addressing ecological crises.

Conclusion

Nirmala Putul's poetry offers a rich site for ecocritical analysis, revealing deep connections among nature, culture, and identity in Adivasi contexts. Through her evocative portrayal of landscapes, critique of development, and emphasis on indigenous knowledge, she challenges dominant anthropocentric paradigms and foregrounds an alternative ecological consciousness.

Her work highlights the intersection of environmental and social justice, demonstrating how ecological degradation disproportionately affects marginalised communities. By integrating ecological awareness with feminist and indigenous perspectives, Putul's poetry offers a holistic understanding of environmental issues. In an era of increasing environmental crises, her voice serves as a powerful reminder of the need to reimagine our relationship with nature. An ecocritical reading of her poetry not only enriches literary studies but also contributes to broader discussions on sustainability and justice.

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