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Jacina Kerketta's Angor: Embers of Adivasi Resistance, Ecological Grief and Feminist Resilience in Contemporary Indian Tribal Poetry

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Abstract

Jacinta Kerketta, born in 1983, is an Oraon Adivasi poet and journalist from Khudpos village in Jharkhand's Saranda Forest region. She published her debut collection of poetry *Angor* (meaning "ember" in the local Sadri dialect), in bilingual mode in 2016 through Adivaani (Kolkata), with a simultaneous Hindi-German edition *Glut*. The collection comprises 41 poems in Hindi with English translations. *Angor* functions as a searing testimonial to the lived realities of India's indigenous communities amid neoliberal development, mining-driven displacement, environmental degradation and gendered violence. Drawing on ecocritical, postcolonial and feminist frameworks, this paper examines how Kerketta deploys the central metaphor of the ember – smouldering rage beneath ash, ready to ignite – as a symbol of suppressed Adivasi memory, hope and resistance. Through close readings of key poems such as "O, City!" , "The River", "The Mountain and the bazaar", "Th (Kerridge) (Bhushan and Kumar) (Karma; Kerketta; Kerketta; J. Kerketta, *Angor*; J. Kerketta, *Angor/ Poetry in Hindi/ English*; Kerridge; Kuiry; Kumar; Prajapati; Saxena)e blossoms of Saranda", " A madua sprout on the grave" and "Ears of Paddy Tied Bound by the Dam", the analysis reveals Kerketta's critique of capitalist exploitation of land and bodies, her reclamation of tribal women's agency and her documentation of cultural erosion. Situating *Angor* within the broader tradition of Adivasi literature and Jharkhand's history of resource conflicts(including the 1855 Hul rebellion), the paper argues that Kerketta's work transforms personal and collective trauma into a poetics of witness and renewal. Secondary scholarship on tribal women's representation and nature imagery in her oeuvre further illuminates her intervention in mainstream Indian literary discourse. Ultimately, *Angor* emerges not merely as poetry but as an act of decolonial assertion, demanding recognition of Adivasi epistemologies that view humans, forests, rivers and mountains as interdependent kin.

Keywords: Jacinta Kertta, Angor, Oraon Adivasi, ecocritical, postcolonial, feminist, mining, displacement, environmental degradation, tribal women's agency, decolonial assertion.

Introduction

Indian tribal, or Adivasi, literature has historically occupied a marginal position within the Indian national canon, frequently relegated to the status of "folk" or "oral" tradition rather than recognised as "serious" literary production. However, from the 1990s onwards – particularly with the emergence of writers such as Mahasweta Devi (a non-tribal ally) and indigenous authors including Alice Ekka, Rose Kerketta, and later Jacinta Kerketta – this body of work has increasingly asserted itself as a crucial counter-narrative to dominant Hindu-majoritarian and developmentalist discourses. Jacinta Kerketta's *Angor* (2016) represents a significant milestone in this trajectory as the first major poetic collection by a young Oraon woman from the mineral-rich yet violence-ridden Saranda Forest region in West Singhbhum district, Jharkhand.

Born on 3 August 1983 in Khudpos village on the banks of the Koel River, Kerketta directly witnessed both the internal fissures within Adivasi familial structures and the broader violence enacted in the name of "development." Her father, a police officer, had internalised patriarchal norms from mainstream society even as he was subjected to caste-like discrimination. Her mother's experience of domestic abuse is explicitly recalled in the preface to *Angor*, where Kerketta writes: "From childhood there was something like a piece of ember trapped somewhere inside me" (J. Kerketta). Her early education in missionary hostels across Bihar and Jharkhand exposed her simultaneously to forms of solidarity among Adivasi girls and to the condescension and prejudice of non-tribal teachers and classmates. A pivotal traumatic event – the murder of her uncle and grandmother in a land dispute, subsequently misrepresented by local media as an instance of "human sacrifice" – propelled her towards journalism. Kerketta went on to study mass communication at St. Xavier's College, Ranchi, worked with *Dainik Jagran* and *Prabhat Khabar*, and later obtained fellowships that enabled extensive travel throughout Jharkhand's districts. These journeys brought into sharp focus a series of systemic injustices: dams submerging ancestral fields without providing irrigation, coal fly ash degrading fertile soil, and corporate mining auctions resulting in the large-scale dispossession of entire villages (Kerketta).

Angor emerged from this crucible of personal trauma and collective struggle. Launched in Ranchi on 20 May 2016, the bilingual volume – translated collaboratively by Bhumika Chawla-D'Souza, Vijay K. Chhabra, and Father Cuprian – presents Kerketta's stark Hindi originals alongside concise English translations that endeavour to preserve the poems' rhythm, tonal intensity, and critical edge. The title itself is richly polysemic: in the local dialect, "angor" denotes the live ember that continues to glow beneath seemingly extinguished ashes, symbolising Adivasi narratives that persist in spite of attempts at erasure. As publisher Johannes Laping observes, Kerketta attains a "lyrical accomplishment – expressing those burning pains and the glow of hope through the metaphor of the angor-embers" (Karma).

This paper undertakes a sustained close reading of *Angor* in conjunction with its historical and socio-ecological contexts. It draws on existing scholarship (for instance, Prajapati on tribal women and Kumar on Adivasi representation) while foregrounding extended primary textual analysis. Adopting an interdisciplinary critical framework – bringing together ecocriticism (Garrard), postcolonial theory (particularly Spivak's notion of the subaltern), and indigenous feminist perspectives – the paper demonstrates how Kerketta's poetry articulates resistance to oppression and exploitation while reasserting indigenous agency. The ember motif functions as an organising metaphor across the collection: personal grief (the mother's suppressed sobs), ecological devastation (the threatened sal

forests of Saranda), gendered experiences of deprivation, and collective memory all smoulder beneath the surface, poised for ignition. In a context where Jharkhand's iron-ore belt—of which Saranda contains approximately one quarter of India's reserves—fuels national narratives of “progress” at the expense of indigenous lives and landscapes, Angor insists that Adivasi voices are not peripheral annotations but constitute the ethical and epistemic centre of any genuinely representative Indian literary and national narrative.

Biographical and Literary Context

Kerketta's trajectory reflects the structural paradoxes of post-2000 Jharkhand. Carved out of Bihar in 2000 in response to long-standing demands for Adivasi self-rule, the new state rapidly became a laboratory for neoliberal extraction. The Scheduled Tribes and Other Traditional Forest Dwellers (Recognition of Forest Rights) Act, 2006, ostensibly promised legal recognition of community forest rights; however, its implementation has remained uneven and delayed, constrained by corporate interests and pressures from companies such as Tata Steel and ArcelorMittal. Saranda, often described as Asia's largest sal forest, exemplifies these tensions: designated a “mining zone,” it has been subject to dynamite blasting, bulldozing, and fly-ash pollution since the 1990s. Kerketta's village is located on the forest's periphery; her poetry therefore emerges from embodied, place-based experience rather than from distant or purely ideological solidarity (Yadav).

Kerketta's work is situated within a literary lineage that includes earlier Oraon and Munda women writers, yet Angor distinguishes itself through its bilingual accessibility and journalistic precision. Departing both from exclusively oral traditions and from elite, metropolitan English-language fiction, Kerketta composes primarily in accessible Hindi, inflected with Sadri and Oraon idioms, and subsequently translates her work for wider, including transnational, readerships (such as the German edition). Critics have argued that this linguistic hybridity simultaneously unsettles norms of “standard” English and intervenes in the hierarchies of Hindi's literary field (Karma).

Critical scholarship on Angor remains emergent but is steadily expanding. Karma Kumar emphasizes the text's documentation of “loss of cultural identity, exploitation of females, lack of proper treatment and educational facilities, helplessness in protecting land and natural resources” (Kumar). Similarly, Dr. Niharika Prajapati's 2025 study foregrounds the multiple and intersecting roles of tribal women—as daughters, wives, mothers, and warriors—while also critiquing domestic violence and sexual assault within customary and kinship structures (Prajapati). For Kerketta, nature is configured as kin rather than commodity. In interviews, she characterizes poetry as a mode of “screaming softly” beyond the constraints of journalistic reportage; Angor, in this sense, allows her to fuse investigative observation with lyric expression (Kerketta).

Jharkhand's Adivasi resistance has a longer genealogy that can be traced back to the 1855 Hul, the Santhal rebellion led by Sidhu and Kanhu Murmu. Although explicitly invoked in Kerketta's later writings, this history of insurgency also reverberates through Angor's subterranean currents of revolt. In the post-independence period, the region witnessed Naxalite mobilization, in part as a response to ongoing dispossession and state-corporate violence. Kerketta neither romanticizes Maoism nor dismisses it unequivocally; rather, she situates youth radicalization as a contingent survival strategy within a development regime that offers superficial pacifiers—such as football tournaments and livestock distribution—while roads, mining projects, and other infrastructural interventions continue to devastate forests and Adivasi lifeworld (Kerketta).

Angor thus occupies a distinctive position within contemporary Adivasi literature: it is neither a nostalgic recuperation of folklore nor an abstract, disembodied form of protest. Instead, it constitutes a visceral testimonial archive authored by a woman who inhabits these contradictions—sufficiently educated and professionally trained to write with critical distance, yet still deeply rooted in, and affectively attuned to, the wounds of the land and community she represents.

The Metaphor of Angor: Embers of Suppressed Rage and Hope

The title of the poetry collection positions the ember as its ontological core. Kerketta evokes an inner “piece of ember” originating in childhood, thereby linking personal trauma to a broader field of collective memory. This metaphorical image recurs throughout the text as a figure for the suppressed yet persistent fires of grief, anger, and resilience that resist extinction. Within Adivasi cosmology, fire functions as a connective medium among earth, ancestors, and future generations; Kerketta both secularizes and sacralizes this element by transforming it into a source of political energy.

In the poem “Lament in Songs” (Geeto ke Bilaap), she juxtaposes ancestors who “brave the sun, hot and scorching” with a younger generation that “edges away / Even from the shine of the morning.” Here, the ember appears to have dimmed under the pressures of cultural erosion, manifest in phenomena such as alcoholism during festivals like Sarhul and the loss of traditional songs. Yet the lament itself operates as an act of rekindling: poetry becomes the breath that fans the concealed coals back into life (Kumar).

This metaphor of the ember thus generates a productive dialectical tension between forces of destruction – mining blasts, environmental devastation – and processes of regeneration, suggested by images such as sprouts on graves and paddy ears defying the encroachment of dams. It resonates strongly with indigenous epistemologies in which humans are not conceived as separate from nature, but as participants in cycles of continual renewal. As Mahadev Toppo, an Adivasi philosopher, observes, Adivasi literature documents struggles so that future generations may inherit a dignified life. Kerketta’s embers can be read as a powerful embodiment of this very mode of intergenerational transmission.

Ecological Themes and Environmental Exploitation

Saranda’s sal forests and Koel river form the affective geography of Angor. Poems indict “development” as necropolitics: dynamite, bulldozers and corporate auctions fragment both landscape and self.

The second poem in the collection “The blossoms of Saranda” opens with visceral imagery of ecological murder:

Yet, gathering all strength, it begins
 To pick out the withered remains
 Of its roots
 Blown up into fragments
 By exploding dynamites.
 The corpse of rain
 Hung by the neck
 Dangles on a tree.
 Right above the forest
 In the oval sky,
 Vultures gather on a feasting spree,
 And streams of bloody tears
 Run down the cheeks of rivers (J. Kerketta, Angor).
 (Bhushan and Kumar) (Bhushan and Kumar) (Bhushan and Kumar)

Personification renders the forest sentient: rain as corpse, rivers weeping blood. “Vultures” recur as a metaphor for miners, contractors, and brokers – echoing colonial and postcolonial extraction. In another poem in the collection, “The mystery of the forest bamboos” the speaker highlights the utter disregard of mining barons for the landscape which was once owned by her ancestors. The land once owned by her ancestors has transformed into a barren land, which would be the site of the extraction

of money by means of minerals at the cost of the lives of Adivasis. The miners and the mining barons disregard the Adivasi culture of conservation of nature. The speaker points out the pain the Adivasis suffer when they are being displaced from their land in the name of development and sees the transformation of their lands in the following lines.

On the sweeping claws of an excavator
 My field from its very roots severed.
 On that machine hung
 Not just that piece of land, but I as well,
 And I realised then
 The agony of being uprooted from one's soil.
 The body of my ancestors
 Was being rent and dismembered,
 And I watched the pieces sell for millions.
 The crowd of buyers
 Turned into a teeming multitude,
 And I felt as if my own body
 Were torn into a million pieces and sold (Kerketta, Angor 85).

One researcher interprets the speaker's emotions as articulating a voice of resistance against "maldevelopment," which is dispossessing Adivasis of their ancestral lands and ownership rights, on which they have lived since time immemorial (Bhushan and Kumar). The speaker laments ecological loss as analogous to the mutilation and violation of her own body. The dispossession of land is not only an environmental catastrophe; it also raises profound questions about the continued existence of Adivasi lives and culture.

The poem in the collection, "The River, the Mountain, and the Bazaar," depicts ecological devastation, fear, and disillusionment, as well as the commodification of nature by mining barons, a process that will certainly disadvantage future generations (Kuiry). It extends this critique of commodification through surreal marketplace satire. In the poem, the speaker's child pleads:

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 (Kerketta 29).

The ironic bazaar dialogue in the Hindi original (*nanhī pidhi daudī—ham a gaye bazar!*) foregrounds the absurdity of a situation in which nature—once an abundant commons—is refigured as an exotic commodity sold in bottles. This scene constitutes a critique of capitalist amnesia, whereby historical relations to land and nonhuman entities are effaced. Rivers and mountains, which are sacred within the Oraon cosmology, are reduced to packaged goods, thereby prefiguring the global ironies of climate change (Kuiry). The poem's bilingual form itself becomes an enactment of cultural survival: Hindi preserves the local idiom and affective texture, while English renders the farcical dimensions of this commodification legible to an external, presumably global readership (Kuiry).

Such poems can be read in relation to Rob Nixon's theorisation of "slow violence": forms of incremental, attritional harm—such as fly-ash pollution and deforestation—that remain largely invisible to mainstream media yet prove catastrophic for Adivasi communities. Kerketta responds to

this occlusion by making the slow and dispersed forms of damage perceptible through the intensifying strategies of lyric compression.

Displacement and Urban Indifferences

Owing to the rapid expansion of industry in Adivasi-inhabited regions – facilitated by the ready availability of natural resources – private national and multinational corporations have established extensive mining operations in forests, mountains, and areas formally designated for tribal communities. Adivasis are further dispossessed through the conversion of forest lands into National Parks and other conservation zones, which often results in their exclusion from ancestral territories. They are evicted and relocated to distant sites without adequate planning for their rehabilitation or the restoration of their livelihoods. One researcher underscores the severity of this large-scale displacement of Adivasis in the following terms:

Adivasis have generally been harmed by displacement due to industrialisation. Nearly 85 lakh tribals had been displaced until 1990 on account of some mega projects, the reservation of forests as National Parks, etc. Tribals constitute 8 per cent of the population but are 55 per cent of the total displaced people in the country. Cash payment does not really compensate them for the difficulties they experience in their living style and ethos (Saxena).

Kerketta, in the poem “O City!”, depicts the stark realities faced by displaced Adivasis residing in urban spaces. The urban populace, however, largely fails to show empathy towards these marginalized communities. Such indifference intensifies the Adivasis’ sense of displacement and rootlessness. Urban India’s apathy is articulated in the poem through the voices of the displaced themselves:

Leaving behind their homes,
Their soil, their bales of straw,
Fleeing the roof over their heads, they often ask,
O City!
Are you ever wrenched by the very roots
In the name of so-called progress? (Kerketta 27).

The refrain’s accusatory repetition indicts the metropolis as the primary beneficiary of rural sacrifice. Dams, roads, and mines generate electricity and infrastructure even as rural fields are submerged or erased. The poem’s rhetorical question – “Are you ever wrenched?” – highlights this asymmetry, underscoring how urban centres consume without empathy. Kerketta draws on her personal observations of villagers who, following displacement, are compelled to become rickshaw pullers or wage labourers in the city.

This theme recurs in the poem “The Six-Lane Freeway of Deceit.” Here, football tournaments organised by corporate entities and the distribution of free goats function as strategies to suppress the protests of Adivasi youth against illegal mining in their regions, even as “agents of mining corporations knock on every village door.” Hunger is mobilised as a mechanism of control: “disease, unemployment and helplessness are shoved down their throats.” The corporations’ tactics – offering petty gifts such as goats – thus expose their deceit and betrayal of Adivasi communities.

Jacinta Kerketta’s poems may be read as a critical response to Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak’s postcolonial problematic, “Can the Subaltern Speak?” Kerketta refuses to remain silent in the face of ongoing injustice. The city, as a metonym for both state and capital, remains wilfully deaf unless poetry intervenes to amplify the “wrenching” experiences of the marginalised.

Representation of Tribal Women and Hunger

Kerketta's poems portray the tribal women who are the worst sufferers in the Adivasi families. Prajapati, in her analysis, reveals Kerketta's nuanced portrayal of tribal women across life stages: resilient yet victimized. Domestic violence, marital rape and customary burdens coexist with breadwinner roles and warrior spirit (Prajapati).

"A Madua Sprout on the Grave" confronts hunger's lethality with bitter irony:

On a little mound of mud in the village
 Has emerged a tiny madua sprout.
 Not a mere mound it is, but a grave,
 In which lies the dead remains
 Of Sugna, perished of hunger and starvation.
 [...]
 Sugna's wife and children
 Will this time not starve to death.
 They will take their own lives instead.
 For dying of hunger, they know too
 well,
 Stirs up no storms, does not sell.
 A suicide, on the other hand,
 Guarantees their corpse will make
 Headlines... (Kerketta 49)

Madua (finger millet), a traditional Adivasi staple, sprouts ironically on the grave, symbolising the persistence of life in the midst of death. The widow's decision to commit suicide after Sugna's death, rather than endure slow starvation, weaponizes media spectacle: only a dramatic death is capable of prompting official inquiries. This dynamic exposes systemic apathy – manifested through dams, mining, and policy failures – that renders Adivasi deaths visible and noteworthy only in their most extreme forms.

The poem "Ears of Paddy Tied, Bound by the Dam" further personalizes the experience of displacement through women's perspectives:

Yet again Phulo's heart
 Is a sweltering, blazing desert...
 Holding on to a few scraps of paper,
 Standing helpless on the banks of the
 Dam,
 In every rain, Salo's mother
 Searches frenziedly for her lost
 Farmlands.
 [...]
 Today Soma starves,
 For his fields are now massive reservoirs
 The cage of his ribs protrudes through the skin...
 These dams shall burst one day for sure,
 When the boughs of sakhua
 From the hilltops in rebellion roar...
 And once again in the breeze will sway
 The ears of paddy in their majesty,
 Enclosed by mud mounds, no more by dams (Kerketta 69).

Phulo, Salo's mother, and Soma exemplify gendered hunger: women guard ultimately futile land documents while men's bodies deteriorate. Yet the closing prophecy – of dams bursting under the rebellion of sakhua (sal) trees – reasserts a residual hope. As some ecofeminists contend, the association of women with nature can now be reconceptualised as a source of strength (Kerridge). Nature, figured through the sakhua boughs, aligns itself with the subaltern. Kerketta thereby synthesises feminist critique with an ecofeminist vision: women's bodies and the land undergo parallel forms of violation, yet both retain a latent regenerative capacity.

Resistance and Reclamation

Jacinta Kerketta's bilingual collection is not merely a lament over Adivasi dispossession in Jharkhand's Saranda forest. It is a sustained act of resistance and reclamation.

Angor rejects victimhood. Poems like *A Rebellion slayed* and *The call of the Dombari Hill* invoke ancestral courage and envision uprising against injustice. The ember motif culminates in quiet defiance. Rather than passive lament, the poems assert agency. In "The Weapons in my Hands", a mother fights with bow and slogan:

We are fighting
For our land, for our soil,
And to preserve our very being(Kerketta 59).

The warrior-mother figure reclaims strength traditionally denied to Adivasi women under both patriarchal and caste-like oppression. Kerketta's poetry is an act of bearing witness. She refuses mainstream media's distortion and journalism's enforced neutrality. In poems such as "O, City!" the displaced directly confronts urban media.

The poem 'Ember' in the collection also represents stories and songs that survive under ash. In "Lament in Songs", the poet mourns lost traditional songs and Sarhul festival spirit, yet the act of lamentation itself rekindles transmission:

In villages, an ember
Goes from one stove
To the other
And a fire in every household kindles(Kerketta 149).

Kerketta refuses to conceptualise forests, rivers, and mountains as commodifiable entities. In "The Blossoms of Saranda" and "Bloodstained Rivers," blasted roots and weeping waters are figured as sentient kin who suffer alongside human communities. The madua sprout on a starvation grave in the poem "A Madua Sprout on the Grave," along with the paddy ears defying dams, symbolize life regenerating from death and reclaiming the land's intrinsic vitality in opposition to developmental necropolitics.

Tribal women emerge as breadwinners, mourners, warriors, and custodians of fire. The poems "The Sun Rising by the Bedside" and "The Vermillion Bond" foreground domestic violence and the reclamation of a lost or suppressed identity. Jacinta's refusal of certain honours, such as the India Today Group award, reflects this poetic stance and demonstrates her commitment to the Adivasi cause over personal gain.

Conclusion

Angor burns with a controlled intensity, suggesting a fire that is carefully tended rather than chaotically unleashed. Kerketta uses images of embers and fire to show how Adivasi pain and resilience continue to glow, even when pushed to the margins. Through ecological lament, she mourns the destruction of forests, rivers, and land that sustain Adivasi life and culture, while her urban indictment exposes how cities and modern development are built on the invisible labour, displacement and

suffering of Indigenous communities. By foregrounding women-centred hunger narratives, she highlights how Adivasi women bear the sharpest edges of poverty, violence, and dispossession.

In doing so, Kerketta converts deeply personal wounds and collective historical trauma into a decolonial poetics that questions dominant power structures. Her poetry demands that Indian literature place Adivasi ways of knowing at the centre, valuing interdependence with land and community over extractive profit, and remembrance over convenient forgetting. In 2026, as mining auctions expand and climate crises worsen, Angor's themes remain sharply relevant to ongoing struggles over land, resources, and survival. The book thus functions both as a literary archive of resistance—preserving voices, memories, and struggles—and as a blueprint for hope, imagining more just futures. Ultimately, Kerketta's Angor evokes the fire hidden beneath ash: when stirred by collective will, it can illuminate new paths of justice or consume the oppressive systems that try to smother it.

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