

Of Ownership and Rights of the Subaltern: Decoding Crises in Aranyer Adhikar(1977) and Kantara(2022)

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One of the most urgent inquiries that postcolonial studies can confront pertains to the concept of 'ownership.' Innately, human beings exhibit a proclivity for wielding power, often emulating traits reminiscent of colonizers and usurpers. In the contemporary landscape, consumer capitalism, akin to a modern Goliath, poses a formidable threat to appropriating intellectual creations. Simultaneously, the enduring socio-cultural quandary of dominion over one's physical and intellectual existence notably persists in contemporary India as well. It is now almost an urgent task for an author and a researcher in the social sciences to create and locate texts that are invariably challenging the power dynamics fueled by the appropriation and monopolisation of knowledge system and money.

The 2022 Kannada blockbuster, *Kantara* transcends the 'South Indian Cinema' stereotype, delving into profound questions surrounding ownership of the human body, mind and land. Subterranean themes of pantheism, casteism, and subaltern livelihood further accentuate the gravity of these ownership dilemmas. Utilising Mahashweta Devi's 1977 novel *Aranyer Adhikar* (Rights over the Forest) as a foundational reference, this research work endeavours to study both the texts as narratives of crisis, where the word 'crisis' contains historical, legal, social, and political dimensions. From a postcolonial lens, this paper will also attempt to find out how, for the subalterns, crises of basic human rights in the struggle for existence, tie the common threads of the multicultural and multiethnic Indian nationhood between the two different geopolitical entities. This research will also look forward to addressing the questions of ownership from an ecocritical point of view and will examine how capitalism can be a great threat to ecological rights.

Keywords: *Crisis narratives, Ecocriticism in Indian literature and cinema, Subaltern rights, Ecocriticism and colonization of India, Ecology and capitalism.*

Introduction

One of the most pressing issues in postcolonial studies is the concept of ownership, particularly how it relates to power dynamics in contemporary society. Historically, the colonizer's desire to dominate lands and peoples was driven by a deep-seated belief in their right to ownership, which extended not just to land but to bodies, minds, and knowledge systems. This legacy of ownership has evolved, now manifesting in the insidious form of consumer capitalism. This new form of domination poses significant challenges, particularly in the context of intellectual property and cultural appropriation, where the commodification of culture and knowledge perpetuates the exploitation of the subaltern.

In India, these dynamics of ownership and rights continue to play out in complex and often violent ways. The subaltern—those marginalized by class, caste, or ethnicity—find themselves at the forefront of battles over land, resources, and identity. This paper explores these themes through a comparative analysis of two texts: Mahasweta Devi's novel *Aranyer Adhikar* (1977) and the 2022 Kannada film *Kantara*. Both narratives address the multifaceted nature of ecological crises, examining how issues of ownership intersect with questions of human rights, survival, and cultural identity.

Aranyer Adhikar is set in colonial India and portrays the struggles of the indigenous people against the British-imposed forest laws that restricted their traditional rights to the land. On the other hand, *Kantara* brings the issue into the present day, focusing on the conflict between a small community and modern capitalists seeking to exploit their land for profit. These texts are not only narratives of crisis but also explorations of how the subaltern, through their struggle for rights and survival, challenge the dominant power structures.

Literature Review

The exploration of ownership in postcolonial studies has been a central theme for scholars such as Edward Said, Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak, and Homi Bhabha. Said's concept of "Orientalism" highlights how Western powers constructed knowledge systems to justify their domination over the East. Spivak's work on the subaltern emphasizes the importance of giving voice to those marginalized by these power structures, while Bhabha's notion of hybridity explores the complex identities that emerge in postcolonial contexts.

In the context of ecological crises, scholars such as Rob Nixon and Vandana Shiva have explored how environmental degradation disproportionately affects the subaltern. Nixon's concept of "slow violence" describes the gradual, often invisible, environmental harm that impacts marginalized communities, while Shiva's work critiques the global capitalist systems that exploit natural resources at the expense of local populations.

Ecocriticism, as a theoretical approach, provides a framework for analyzing the intersection of environmental and social justice issues in literature and film. By examining how narratives depict the relationship between humans and the environment, ecocriticism sheds light on the ways in which ecological degradation is linked to social and economic inequalities. This paper applies these theoretical perspectives to analyze how *Aranyer Adhikar* and *Kantara* address the multifaceted nature of ecological crises, ownership, and subaltern rights.

Ownership and Rights in *Aranyer Adhikar*

Mahasweta Devi's *Aranyer Adhikar* is a seminal work that explores the struggle of the indigenous people of India against the colonial government's forest laws. The novel is set in the early 20th century and follows the life of Birsa Munda, a tribal leader who led a rebellion against British rule. The forest laws, imposed by the British, stripped the indigenous people of their traditional rights to the land, criminalizing their way of life and reducing them to mere laborers on the land they once owned.

The concept of ownership in *Aranyer Adhikar* is deeply tied to the identity and survival of the indigenous people. The forest is not just a resource for them; it is a sacred space that sustains their culture, spirituality, and community life. Devi's portrayal of the subaltern's struggle against the colonial state highlights the intersection of ecological and human rights, where the loss of land is synonymous with the loss of identity and autonomy.

Birsa Munda's rebellion is not just a fight for land but a broader struggle against the colonial system that seeks to erase the subaltern's way of life. The novel's depiction of this struggle reflects the broader postcolonial critique of ownership, where the colonizer's claim to land and resources is seen as an act of violence against the indigenous population. The ecological crisis in *Aranyer Adhikar* is therefore multifaceted, encompassing issues of environmental degradation, cultural erasure, and social injustice.

Ecological Crisis and Subaltern Rights in *Kantara*

Kantara is a contemporary Kannada film that addresses similar themes of ownership and rights, albeit in a modern context. The film is set in a small village in Karnataka, where the local community's traditional rights to the land are threatened by modern capitalists seeking to exploit the land for profit. The conflict in *Kantara* is not just about land ownership but about the community's right to maintain their way of life, which is deeply connected to the land.

The film's portrayal of the subaltern is complex, depicting how the community navigates the pressures of modernity while trying to preserve their cultural and spiritual connection to the land. The conflict over land ownership in *Kantara* is portrayed as an ecological crisis, where the exploitation of natural resources by capitalist interests threatens the very survival of the community. The film's depiction of this crisis reflects Vandana Shiva's critique of globalization, where the imposition of Western capitalist systems on local communities leads to environmental degradation and social injustice.

Kantara also delves into themes of pantheism, casteism, and the subaltern livelihood, which accentuate the complexities

of ownership dilemmas in contemporary India. The film's narrative, enriched by its visual storytelling, uses long shots and panoramic views to emphasize the community's deep connection to the land, while close-ups and medium shots capture the emotional and physical toll of the ongoing conflict on the characters.

Cinematic Techniques and Narrative Structure

Both *Aranyer Adhikar* and *Kantara* use narrative and cinematic techniques to emphasize the urgency of the ecological crises they depict. In *Aranyer Adhikar*, Devi employs a straightforward narrative style that allows the story of Birsa Munda and his people to unfold with a sense of inevitability. The linear progression of the story mirrors the inexorable encroachment of colonial power on the lives of the indigenous people, culminating in the rebellion led by Birsa.

Kantara, on the other hand, uses a more dynamic narrative structure, interspersing moments of intense action with quieter, more contemplative scenes. The film's use of cinematography is particularly noteworthy, with the lush, verdant landscape of the village serving as a backdrop to the unfolding drama. The cinematographer's use of natural lighting and long takes captures the beauty of the land, while also conveying the fragility of the community's connection to it. The editing style, which alternates between fast-paced sequences and slower, more reflective moments, mirrors the tension between the old ways and the forces of modernity that threaten to overwhelm them.

The use of sound in *Kantara* also plays a crucial role in conveying the film's themes. The soundtrack, composed by B. Ajaneesh Loknath, blends traditional folk music with more contemporary sounds, reflecting the film's exploration of the tension between tradition and modernity. The diegetic sounds of nature—the rustling of leaves, the chirping of birds, the flow of water—serve as a constant reminder of the land's importance to the community and the threat posed by its exploitation.

Ecocritical Analysis

From an ecocritical perspective, both *Aranyer Adhikar* and *Kantara* explore the impact of capitalism on the environment and the people who depend on it for their survival. In *Aranyer Adhikar*, the British forest laws represent an early form of environmental exploitation, where the colonizers' desire for profit leads to the destruction of the forest and the displacement of the indigenous people. The novel critiques this exploitation, highlighting the ways in which the colonizers' actions disrupt the delicate balance between the people and their environment.

Kantara continues this critique, examining how modern capitalism perpetuates similar forms of exploitation. The film's portrayal of the conflict over land ownership reflects the ongoing struggle between traditional ways of life and the forces of globalization. The ecological crisis in *Kantara* is not just about the destruction of the environment, but also about the loss of cultural and spiritual connections to the land.

Both texts highlight the interconnectedness of ecological and social crises, showing how the exploitation of the environment is inextricably linked to the oppression of the subaltern. By focusing on the experiences of the indigenous people in *Aranyer Adhikar* and the rural community in *Kantara*, these narratives underscore the importance of preserving both the environment and the cultural practices that sustain it.

Conclusion

The analysis of *Aranyer Adhikar* and *Kantara* reveals the multifaceted nature of ecological crises in India, where issues of ownership, rights, and survival are deeply intertwined. Both texts offer a critique of the forces of colonialism and capitalism that have historically exploited the environment and marginalized communities. Through their narratives, these works highlight the resilience of the subaltern in the face of these challenges, while also calling attention to the ongoing struggles for environmental and social justice.

By examining these texts through the lens of ecocriticism, this paper has sought to demonstrate how the themes of ownership

and rights are central to understanding the ecological crises depicted in *Aranyer Adhikar* and *Kantara*. These works remind us that the fight for environmental preservation is also a fight for the rights and survival of the subaltern, and that true ecological justice cannot be achieved without addressing the underlying social and economic inequalities that drive environmental degradation.

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