
The Representation of Tribal Identity in the Works of Hansda Sowvendra Shekhar

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ABSTRACT

Tribal literature has been emerging as a significant genre in the Indian English literature of the present scenario due to its ability to provide a platform to the marginalised communities which have been deprived of their voice and perspectives for centuries. Hansda Sowvendra Shekhar is one of the leading tribal writers of India for his realistic and sensitive depiction of the Santhal tribal community. His writings focus on the everyday lives, traditions, struggles, aspirations and cultural identity of tribal people. Shekhar's portrayal of the tribal communities differs from the prevailing mainstream literature, which romanticizes them as primitive or exotic, and depicts them as complex human beings dealing with poverty, displacement, migration, discrimination and identity crisis in the contemporary India. The purpose of this research paper is to critically analyse the representation of tribal identity in the selected works of Hansda Sowvendra Shekhar, particularly in the works *The Mysterious Ailment of Rupri Baskey*, *The Adivasi Will Not Dance* and *My Father's Garden*. The paper explores major themes such as marginalization, cultural preservation, gender oppression, economic exploitation, migration, displacement and the conflict between tradition and modernity. The study also highlights Shekhar's critique of stereotypes found in the literature of the tribal community and his involvement in subaltern discourse in Indian English literature. The research adopts qualitative and analytical methods based on textual analysis and theoretical perspectives related to postcolonialism and subaltern studies. In his stories Shekhar not only preserves the memory and indigenous consciousness of the tribe but also criticizes the social injustice and unequal power relations existing in the Indian society. His contribution to

literature is of immense importance since it adds another dimension to Indian English literature and introduces tribal realities into the mainstream literary discourse.

Keywords: *Tribal Identity, Santhal Community, Indigenous Literature, Marginalisation*

INTRODUCTION

In the last few decades there has been an extraordinary transformation in Indian English literature. It was primarily concerned with the urban middle classes, the colonial encounters, nationalism and post-colonial identity, earlier, though. However, contemporary Indian literature has increasingly become inclusive by representing the voices of marginalized communities such as Dalits, women, minorities and tribal groups. Tribal literature in particular has become a significant literary movement in that it demonstrates the experiences and tribulations of the indigenous communities whose voices have been largely neglected in the dominant literary and historical contexts. Tribal people in India have been traditionally targeted for exclusion, impoverishment, eviction and exploitation. They have often been stereotyped in the main stream narrative, despite their rich cultural heritage. Tribal people were frequently represented as uncivilized, backward, primitive, or romanticised as people living in harmony with nature without considering their socio-economic condition. Contemporary tribal writers rebel against these traits by giving authentic portrayals of tribal life and affirming their identity in literature.

Hansda Sowvendra Shekhar is one of the most prominent contemporary tribal voices in Indian English literature among such writers. He is a native of Jharkhand and a member of the Santhal tribe, which adds authenticity and insight to his written work. His writings have a realistic, empathetic, and honest depiction of the day-to-day life of the tribes. He addresses important social issues such as poverty, migration, land displacement, gender oppression, unemployment, cultural loss and identity crisis. His major works include *The Mysterious Ailment of Rupi Baskey* (2014), *The Adivasi Will Not Dance* (2015) and *My Father's Garden* (2018). These texts capture the emotional, social and cultural lives of tribal communities and also reveal the monstrous nature of exploitation and marginalisation. Through simple yet powerful storytelling, Shekhar represents tribal people not as passive victims but as resilient individuals struggling for dignity and recognition.

His writings are significant because of the way they question the prevailing perceptions surrounding tribal communities. His literature does not try to define tribal identity in the eyes

of an outsider, but from the inside. He infuses his narratives with oral history, folklore, indigenous beliefs, and contemporary social realities, all of which help to sustain tribal memory and avert cultural extinction. This research paper critically examines the representation of tribal identity in the works of Hansda Sowvendra Shekhar. It examines how his writings reflect Santhal culture, social realities, gender relations, economic exploitation, migration and resistance. The paper also explores the importance of his contribution to tribal literature and Indian English literature.

OBJECTIVES OF THE STUDY

The major objectives of this research paper are to analyze the representation of tribal identity in the works of Hansda Sowvendra Shekhar, with special focus on the portrayal of Santhal culture, traditions, rituals and social life. The study also seeks to examine key issues that are evident in his writing, including marginalisation, poverty and migration and displacement. It also aims to analyse the portrayal of tribal women and tribal issues, and to understand the tension between tradition and modernity in tribal communities. In addition, the research aims at studying the modes of tribal resistance and assertion of identity depicted in Shekhar's literary works and his contribution to the contemporary Indian English literature and subaltern discourse.

RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

The research paper uses qualitative and analytical research methods. The primary sources for the study are Hansda Sowvendra Shekhar's major literary works, especially *The Mysterious Ailment of Rupi Baskey*, *The Adivasi Will Not Dance* and *My Father's Garden*. The study also relies on secondary sources like journal articles, books, literary criticism and research papers on tribal literature, postcolonial studies and indigenous identity. The research adopts postcolonial and subaltern perspectives to examine the representation of tribal communities and their socio-cultural realities. Themes, characterization, narrative techniques, symbolism and cultural representation are analyzed with textual analysis. The paper also focuses on socio-political contexts in the understanding of tribal identity, which include the process of industrialization, migration, displacement and globalization.

LITERATURE REVIEW

The study of tribal literature has become significant in India today due to its focus on the experiences, struggles and identities of the indigenous peoples that have been overlooked or stereotyped in the mainstream literature. In the context of tribal writing, it is worth noting that both Ranajit Guha and Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak, two scholars, have emphasized the

recovery of the marginalised voice and the questioning of the dominant systems of representation and ideas. Hansda Sowvendra Shekhar's works focus on themes of displacement, poverty, migration, and loss of culture among tribal communities, which are themes that strongly appear in the works of Virginius Xaxa. In *The Adivasi Will Not Dance* and *The Mysterious Ailment of Rupi Baskey*, Shekhar's realistic depiction of Santhal life has been welcomed by critics who have been interested in dimensions of resistance, cultural appropriation, gender concerns, poverty and the clash between tradition and modernity. Although considerable research has been conducted on tribal literature and Shekhar's writings, there is still scope for deeper analysis of tribal identity, cultural resistance and indigenous perspectives.

TRIBAL LITERATURE AND THE CONCEPT OF TRIBAL IDENTITY

Tribal literature refers to literary works that portray the lives, culture, traditions, beliefs, struggles and aspirations of indigenous communities. In India, these communities are often referred to as Adivasis (original inhabitants of the land). These communities have their own language, culture, rituals, folklore, and social systems that are different from the mainstream. Tribal identity is inextricably linked to the land, nature, community life, folklore, language and collective memory. There are close connections between forest, rivers, and natural environments with tribal communities. Their cultural practices are rooted in oral traditions, rituals, music and festivals. Therefore, displacement from land not only affects their economic condition but also threatens their cultural identity.

Tribal communities have faced critical issues of modernization, industrialization, urbanization, mines and capitalist expansion. Many tribal people have been displaced from their ancestral lands in the name of development. People move to the city for jobs and may end up alienating themselves socially and losing their culture. Here, literature is a strong means of resistance and cultural preservation. Storytelling The function of storytelling in tribal writers is to save memory, to assert identity and to challenge the dominant power structure. His works make important contributions to this literary movement, offering realistic portrayals of Santhal life and indigenous consciousness.

REPRESENTATION OF SANTHAL CULTURE AND TRADITIONS

One of the most remarkable aspects of Hansda Sowvendra Shekhar's writings is his detailed representation of Santhal culture and traditions. His stories are grounded in the social and cultural circumstances of tribal existence. Through vivid storytelling, he portrays rituals, customs, festivals, beliefs, kinship structures and oral traditions of the Santhal community. In

The Mysterious Ailment of Rupi Baskey, village life is portrayed with remarkable sensitivity and realism. The novel demonstrates how much family relationships, community bonds, traditional beliefs and healing in tribal society are significant. Shekhar shows a picture of village life not as a dream land, but as a place of complicated social interaction, love, jealousy, suffering and survival. The novel is centered on an enigmatic disease that strikes Rupi Baskey. Her sickness becomes the metaphor of emotional pain, social pressure and burden of expectations imposed on women. The other aspect of the narrative is the portrayal of the village's ambiance, setting, and daily life with vivid descriptions of farming activities, festivals, food habits, and interactions between the people. Shekhar's employment of regional languages and native place names helps to lend authenticity to his writing. He draws upon the oral tradition storytelling techniques, an integral part of tribal culture. The narrative style can be similar to the way oral stories are transmitted from one generation to the next.

In *The Adivasi Will Not Dance*, music and dance are intimately linked with cultural identity and collective memory. In tribal communities, dance isn't just about fun; it's a way of life and a symbol of their culture and identity. It is important to note that the title story becomes particularly significant in the context of the protagonist's inability to perform for political leaders that exploit tribal communities. His rejection is a sign of opposition to the commercialization of tribal culture. The stories also depict festivals, rituals and local customs as significant aspects of tribal life. He shows tribal culture to be dynamic and living and not static or primitive. Through his narratives, readers understand that tribal traditions carry emotional, social and spiritual significance.

Another important aspect of Shekhar's portrayal is his representation of tribal spirituality and belief systems. His works are often infused with traditional healing practices, superstitions and local religious customs. He doesn't ridicule these beliefs, though. Rather, he depicts them as the community's sense of world and its culture. He is known for his writings which help in preserving the cultural memory of the Santhal community. His writing serves as a repository of the native experiences and traditions being lost to modernization and cultural assimilation.

THE IMPACT OF MARGINALISATION AND ECONOMIC EXPLOITATION

Marginalisation is one of the major themes in Hansda Sowvendra Shekhar's works. Historically, tribal communities in India have been marginalized, impoverished, jobless, illiterate, under-resourced for health care, and economically exploited. He depicts these realities with realism and reveals the inequitable social systems that stigmatize tribal communities. In many of his tales, the tribal characters are in search of the basic necessities

of life. Their daily lives are influenced and their opportunities are constrained by poverty. He does not glorify pain and is very truthful about it in everyday circumstances and human experiences.

Another important theme in his writing is migration. Many tribal people are forced to leave their villages and move to cities in search of work because agricultural opportunities are limited and traditional livelihoods are disappearing. There is a tendency to be exploited, lonely, and experiencing a sense of identity crisis as a consequence of migration. In cities, there's discrimination against tribal people and humiliation. They are excluded from society and evaluated by stereotypes. In the story "They Eat Meat!," written by *The Adivasi Will Not Dance*, there is a strong depiction of social prejudice against the tribal communities. The story exposes how tribal identity can be a source of shame and exclusion within the mainstream society.

Industrialization and mining also play a role in tribal displacement. Industrialization frequently leads to deforestation and the loss of tribal lands, displacing people from their homes and their traditional lives. He challenges the concept of development that serves the interests of corporations and political elites and displaces indigenous people. This is a strong theme of the title story of *The Adivasi Will Not Dance*. The protagonist's anger is a result of the oppression of tribal land and culture. Tribal dancers are asked to perform at public functions and the suffering of displaced communities is ignored. When people refuse to dance in protest against this hypocrisy.

The representation of labour is also a place of economic exploitation. Tribal workers are often employed in low-paying and physically demanding jobs. They still do not enjoy economic security and social visibility. Shekhar points out that poverty creates extremely challenging situations where dignity and survival are always competing. Through these depictions he invites the reader to think about prevailing narratives of progress and development. His works expose the individual impact of economic policies that fail to take into account indigenous rights and social justice.

REPRESENTATION OF TRIBAL WOMEN

The representation of tribal women is one of the most significant aspects of Hansda Sowvendra Shekhar's writings. His female characters are portrayed with emotional depth and realism. These are depicted as industrious, resilient, caring and complex people who wage a fight against poverty, patriarchy, social pressure and exploitation. Tribal women are usually romanticized or sexualized in the main stream literature. He counters these stereotypes by

introducing women as actual flesh-and-blood people with desires, fears, emotions and agency. His acting displays their power and their weakness.

The character of Rupī is the focus of the gender and suffering exploration in *The Mysterious Ailment of Rupī Baskey*. Her disease is not just about pain but also emotional and social burdens. In his experiences, Shekhar explores the challenges for women in the family and community. Rupī is not just treated as an innocent victim. She shows emotional endurance and resilience, even as she suffers. Her character embodies the silent struggle of many tribal women who are laboring without being celebrated for their work and sacrifice.

In his work, women are often cast with multi roles. They perform agricultural tasks, run households, look after children and contribute to family survival. But they also suffer from domestic violence and social judgment and gender inequalities. A number of stories focus on the sexual exploitation and labour exploitation of women from the tribes. Women are particularly at risk in the cities due to poverty and migration. These issues are portrayed in an honest manner, and not sensationalised. Simultaneously, there are examples of women's solidarity and emotional support in his stories. Women share experiences, provide comfort and social connections among the community. These relationships turn into their important sources of strength. His depiction of the tribal women helps in feminist discourse in Indian English literature. His writings show the interaction between gender oppression and economic and social marginalisation. Tribal women are subjected to several forms of discrimination on the basis of class, ethnicity and gender. He brings the character of women to life and provides dignity to their lives that is not limited to simplistic representations.

IDENTITY CRISIS AND THE CONFLICT BETWEEN TRADITION AND MODERNITY

The conflict between tradition and modernity is another theme that has been prevalent in Hansda Sowvendra Shekhar's writing. Today, globalization, industrialization, urbanization, education and migration have created rapid social and economic changes for tribal communities. These shifts can often lead to identity conflicts and cultural tensions. The younger generations are often entrapped between the traditional values of their tribes and their modern ambitions. They are introduced to the urban lifestyle and mainstream culture through education and employment. As a result, many tribal individuals experience alienation from their roots and cultural traditions. In his works, migration becomes an important factor contributing to identity crisis. Migrants to urban areas from tribal (rural) communities face

difficulties in adjusting to urban environment. They face discrimination and social exclusion while also losing connection with their traditional way of life.

Modernization also brings about changes in family structures and social relationships. The usual mechanisms of a community's cohesion are deteriorating with the rise of economic pressures. The situation where younger members of a tribe leave their homes and begin to live urban lives poses a threat for the erosion of tribal culture. However, Shekhar does not completely reject modernity. He offers a balanced view, demonstrating that tribal communities too want education, health services, jobs, social dignity. The issue is not modernization as such, but an assimilation-based modernization system that rejects cultural identity. His stories seem to imply that the destruction of culture does not have to be part of development. Tribal communities must be allowed to maintain their traditions and customs within the framework of modern society. In his stories, the clash between old and new values is often present. The protagonist is usually faced with a challenge to preserve his/her cultural identity while adjusting to new realities. This battle mirrors the general situation of numerous Indigenous communities in modern India. By documenting tribal customs, memories and experiences, Shekhar's literature becomes a form of cultural preservation. His writings are about the preservation of indigenous identity from cultural erasure and historical invisibility.

TRIBAL RESISTANCE AND ASSERTION OF IDENTITY

One of the most prominent lines that resonate through Hansda Sowvendra Shekhar's writings is resistance. His characters are not shown as helpless victims but as people who are able to protest, defy and hold their own in matters of self-respect. They stand up for their dignity and identity in acts of resistance. The story in this book that is most obvious about this resistance is the title story, *The Adivasi Will Not Dance*. The main character is an individual who refuses to dance in front of politicians who are displacing tribal communities from their lands. In the context of public display, dance, a symbol of joy and cultural expression, becomes politicized. In this respect, refusing to give back represents the rejection of humiliation and exploitation. It's a reflection of the anger that's been felt by communities whose culture is celebrated superficially, without their suffering being taken into account.

Shekhar's resistance is not necessarily dramatic and violent. It often manifests as silence, memory, storytelling or holding on to things emotionally. Tribal characters fight cultural erasure by maintaining the traditions, language and social bonds. Storytelling is a means of resistance. By narrating tribal experiences from within the community, he challenges mainstream narratives that misrepresent indigenous people. His literature gives space to the

voices of the marginalized in Indian English literature. Tribal identity is also linked to territory, to memory. Land for tribal communities is not just a piece of property it is part of their culture and their spiritual identity. As a result, when displacement happens it is a kind of cultural violence. His writings call upon the reader to see the tribal community as an active player in society and not as a passive player. His works call for the dignity, equality and justice of indigenous people. He adds to the wider debates on human rights, cultural survival and social justice in modern-day India in his resistance narrative.

NARRATIVE TECHNIQUE AND LITERARY STYLE

Hansda Sowvendra Shekhar's literary style is simple, direct, realistic and emotionally powerful. His stories are not overly embellished, but rather depict real human experiences. His works are simple and easy to understand yet at the same time, they are meant to evoke emotions. One of the major strengths of his writing is realism. He is a realistic depiction of tribal life without idealizing the conditions of poverty or suffering. His stories are about people and everyday life, and therefore about very human and relatable stories. His use of local language, indigenous names and cultural references strengthens the authenticity of his works. His stories are structured and patterned like elements of oral storytelling traditions. In these techniques, he brings his writing in line with tribal cultural activities. Dialogue plays an important role in character development. Speech between characters expresses feelings, social tensions, cultural values and personal conflicts. Characters' speech is determined by their social context and cultural upbringing.

Shekhar also successfully employs symbols. In *The Mysterious Ailment of Rupi Baskey*, illness symbolizes emotional suffering, social anxiety and hidden tensions within the community. In *The Adivasi Will Not Dance*, dance is the sign of cultural identity, dignity and resistance. The land, forests, hunger, migration and labour are recurring symbols of larger socio-political realities. These symbols provide depth to his narratives without straying too far from the everyday. One of his major characteristics is empathy. Despite his portrayal of unpleasant truths, his characters are treated with compassion and dignity. He does not pass judgment on the moral aspects of the experiences of the tribes, but lets readers document the intricacies of the emotional landscapes of these groups. His narration blends his personal experience with social issues. He raises broader issues of identity, inequality, displacement and cultural survival through his individual lives. The emotional quality of his work is not just in the dramatic moments but also in the subtle depiction of relationships, loneliness,

memory and suffering. His literature is of social relevance and artistic value because of this narrative strength.

PERSPECTIVES OF POSTCOLONY AND SUBALTERN

A postcolonial and subaltern approach is useful in interpreting Hansda Sowvendra Shekhar's writings. Postcolonial studies examine the impact of colonialism, power structures, identity and cultural representation. Subaltern studies are studies about a marginalised group whose voice has been absent from the dominant story. The tribal people in India have been marginalised in terms of economic exploitation, social exclusion and political neglect. This book does not have the capacity to engage with their histories and experiences in the ways that mainstream literature and official histories did. His literature brings this exclusion to a question, placing tribal voices and experiences at the center. His stories are not from a different lens, but rather from within the community. This raises the question of the Subaltern's voice, which is posed by Gayatri Spivak in her book, "Can the Subaltern Speak?" She believes that there are exclusionary mechanisms in power systems that do not allow the representation of marginalised groups. His literary works try to fill this void and make space for tribal voices.

In the same way, Ranajit Guha has focused the attention on the agency of the subaltern group in his subaltern studies. His characters exhibit agency in their resistance, memory and cultural assertion. In addition, postcolonial theory explores the possible ways in which the concepts of modernization and development can be forms of internal colonialism. This process is reflected in tribal displacement due to mining projects, industrialization, and capitalist expansion. Indigenous people are displaced in the name of national progress and their cultural and economic rights are neglected. He condemns such unequal power relations in realistic stories. His works reveal the dilemmas of development for powerful groups and for the poor and vulnerable. Meanwhile, his literary works acknowledge the strength and continuity of tribal people. His writings help to protect and preserve the native experience and traditions, resisting the cultural domination and erasure of history. Therefore, in Indian English writing, his works significantly play a role in postcolonial and subaltern discourse.

CRITICALLY RESPONDING AND CONTROVERSIALLY THINKING

Hansda Sowvendra Shekhar is a poet who has been accorded a lot of recognition for his contribution to the world of tribal and Indian English literature. His portrayal of the Santhal life is considered authentic by critics, and his efforts to tackle social issues are commendable. His works have been extolled for realism, emotionalism and cultural authenticity. He is

regarded as one of the most significant voices for the marginalised indigenous people in modern India. *The Mysterious Ailment of Rupi Baskey* was discussed in detail for the realistic depiction of the life and family dynamics of a village. It was focussed upon for its comprehensive description of the village life and family relations. The novel's emotional sensitivity and realistic characterization were appreciated by critics. *The Adivasi Will Not Dance* was especially significant due to its strong depiction of tribal resistance and socio-economic exploitation. This collection introduced the issues of the tribes into the literary mainstream. However, some of his works have also generated controversy. Some groups complained about his depiction of tribal communities and about the negative depiction of tribal women in some stories; and the stereotype in others. In particular, the story "November Is the Month of Migrations" became controversial due to its depiction of poverty and survival. In spite of the controversies, many scholars uphold Shekhar's right to depict the social reality honestly. They believe that literature should not cow people into not confronting hard truths in favour of 'idealized'. The controversy surrounding his works brings into focus broader issues of identity, representation and freedom of expression. They also provide insight into the relevance of tribal literature in the present context of cultural debates. His contribution is still relevant because he has taken Indian English literature out of the confines of urban and middle class experiences. Through his work, he is making marginal voices visible in literature and inviting the reader to participate in issues of inequality and justice.

SIGNIFICANCE OF SHEKHAR IN CONTEMPORARY INDIAN ENGLISH LITERATURE

Hansda Sowvendra Shekhar is a significant figure in the Indian English literature of the present day, due to his incorporation of the realities of the tribal world into the mainstream literary discourse. His writings challenge dominant narratives and broaden the understanding of Indian identity and culture. One of his most significant achievements is the portrayal of tribal populations in an authentic way. Most of the representations in the literature were by outsiders who romanticized or misunderstood tribal life. His writings reflect the emotional truth and cultural richness of his Santhal community. His works also contribute to the preservation of indigenous culture. Through stories, rituals, folklore, language, and memory, he documents aspects of tribal life threatened by modernization and displacement.

He also contributed significantly in the area of social justice. He exposes exploitation, discrimination, and inequality while emphasizing the dignity and humanity of tribal people. His works evoke readers' empathy and awareness. His representation of tribal women adds

further significance to his work. He is able to represent women as persons who are more than just stereotypes, and so brings to feminist debates in tribal and Indian literature. His work is also a reinforcement of subalterns literature, where he has given a voice to the othered people or groups. His stories make a reader really question some of the fundamental notions of development, progress and civilization. His literature becomes socially and politically relevant in contemporary India, where the tribal communities are still being displaced and are culturally marginalized. It is a form of art and a form of resistance. Hansda Sowvendra Shekhar, for this reason, becomes a strong literary voice whose contributions to Indian English literature and who sustains the indigenous consciousness are boundless.

CONCLUSION

Thus, his works offer an extremely potent and realistic portrayal of the tribal identity in the Indian English literature today. Through his novels and short stories, he portrays the socio-cultural realities, struggles, traditions, aspirations, and emotional lives of the Santhal community with authenticity and sensitivity. His works exposes the stereotyped images of tribal communities and shows them as complex human beings who are suffering from poverty, migration, displacement, discrimination and identity crisis. His literary vision focuses on themes of marginalisation, economic exploitation, gender oppression, cultural conflict and resistance. His advocacy for tribal women underscores aspects of their strength and fragility in male-dominated and economically underprivileged societies. His narratives also examine the tension between tradition and modernity, highlighting the challenges faced by tribal groups as they attempt to maintain their cultural identity in a world that is rapidly evolving. Resistance is one of his most important aspects of literature. Through acts of protest, memory, story and cultural preservation, the characters in his works claim their dignity and identity. Literature itself is a resistance to the historical invisibility and cultural erasure. Shekhar's emotionally charged narration, with simplicity and authenticity, extends the realm of Indian English literature by tapping into the experiences of indigenous people in the mainstream literary discourse. His works are also invaluable to subaltern studies, postcolonial literature and tribal literary movements. His writings are still relevant for tribal communities in modern India who are still subjected to social exclusion and displacement. They invite readers to acknowledge the humanity, cultural diversity and rights of native peoples. Therefore, Shekhar is a significant literary figure whose works help to maintain the tribal consciousness, question social injustice and redefine the Indian English literature representations of indigenous identity.

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