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“This life will not let us escape”: Portrayal of Womanhood in Hansda S.

Shekhar’s *The Adivasi Will Not Dance*

Santi Ranjan Sing

M.Phil Scholar,
Jadavpur University (W.B.)

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Abstract:

Speaking about feminism in Indian English texts isn’t exclusive, but what distinguishes this study from others is the picturing of women in a tribal and semi-tribal society. The socioeconomic, sociopolitical, religious and ideological origins of the millennial tribal ideals are traced through the stories like “Blue Baby”, “Baso –jhi”, “Merely a Whore”, “Eating with the Enemy”, “Desire, Divination, Death”, and “November is the Month of Migrations” in Hansda Sowvendra Shekhar’s *The Adivasi Will Not Dance* (2015). Female characters in the selected stories are studied in their relationships as mothers, wives, daughters, lovers, brides, servants, prostitutes, widows, “dahni” [witch] and as distinct selves too. Even after being the doubly oppressed and “doubly colonized”, the female tribal characters stand out in their own unique way in terms of their characteristic traits, attitudes, perspectives and intellect.

Thus, through the characters’ views and the author’s perspective, this paper seeks to explore the complex identity and condition of the women in the poverty stricken, middle class, santhal patriarchal society. Simultaneously, drawing philosophical supports from several feminist critics this paper also focuses on the concepts of the ‘other’, ‘subaltern’, ‘marginality’, ‘ecofeminism’ and ‘phallogocentrism’.

Keywords: Feminism, subaltern, glass ceiling, ecofeminism, tribe.

Introduction:

The picturing of women characters in literature, especially in Indian English Writings, is as old as its origin. But the depiction generally shows a particular stereotyping about women or female characters. The male dominant mentality in a patriarchal society caused the authors to create such stereotypes. The reason behind it is that there is a serious dearth of women writers

and most of the literary texts in the canon of Indian English Literature are produced by male authors with their typical male-centric or phallogocentric¹ viewpoint that ends up creating women characters in the same traditional romanticized way as before. Hansda Sowvendra Shekhar, even after being a male author, seems to oppose such phallogocentrism in his depiction of women characters. Rather, in spite of romanticizing the female characters, he tries to describe them as they appear to be. And this kind of depiction of women in a Santhal tribal community is something that separates Shekhar from other writers- male or female.

Among ten stories in his *The Adivasi Will Not Dance* (2015), Shekhar attributes more than half in portraying rather focusing women characters- protagonists or narrators. The select stories that deal with prominent women characters are “November Is the Month of Migration”, “Eating with the Enemy”, “Blue Baby”, “Baso-jhi”, “Desire, Divination, Death” and “Merely a Whore”. The first of its kind “November Is the Month of Migration” narrates the story of a twenty-year-old Talamai Kisku who is going to Bardhaman district of West Bengal with her family and among the forty-three people making this journey to “plant rice and other crops in farms owned by *zamindars* of Bardhaman” (Shekhar 39). The story depicts the extremes that poverty can lead to. At the railway platform, she is approached by a young, fair, *diku jawan* [non-tribal soldier] of the Railway Protection Force who carries out a sexual transaction with her only for “two pieces of cold bread *pakora* and a fifty-rupee note” (Shekhar 42).

“Eating with the Enemy” is a complex portrayal of the life of a domestic help Sulochona and her husband’s another wife, Mohini and their bonding over needy/greedy times. Sulochona, a Harijan of the Ghaasi caste from Ghatshila marries a man called Dinanath Behera whose death pushes her and her family to extreme difficulties. The story simultaneously focuses on Mohini who was from the milkman caste and was much younger than both Dinanath and Sulochona. Before getting married to Dinanath, she used to run a *desi-liquor bhati*. Had she carried on selling alcohol, “she would have also ended up selling her body” (Shekhar 65).

“Blue Baby” is the story of a plotting woman Gita and her love and betrayal. In order to reach her goal, Gita marries Suren but carries a love-child with Dilip, her lover before marriage. Unlike the other stories of this collection, this one show a woman’s ill-conceived plan to escape an arranged marriage by getting pregnant beforehand. And according to her if the plan works, Suren might give her away to Dilip. Simultaneously, this story also puts light on the craving for

self-assertion of a woman in a male dominating society where she is made to marry a man, she doesn't love to assure her financial security.

“Baso-jhi” is a poignant eponymous tale of an elderly, widow Santhal woman Basanti [Baso] and her dreadfully painful experiences with superstition and resultant atrocities and ostracism in the Adivasi society. Once a captivating, eloquent, fascinating old woman of Sarjomdih, who shared fairy tales with the children of the village and took the “young minds on a journey to realms of magic and fantasy” (Shekhar 114) is now accused of black magic, sorcery or witchcraft. First, she is thrown away by her own sons, whom she brought up alone after her husband's death, accusing her to be witch and then charged by Pushpa, her new refuge, to be a *dahni* – witch after three consecutive deaths take place in Sarjomdih. This is also a story of survival of a woman who even after being a widow “survived everything- hunger, poverty, scheming relatives and salacious leers” (Shekhar 125).

The next story “Desire, Divination and Death” first appeared in *Indian Literature* (2007) narrates the story of Subhashini and her ailing son. Here Shekhar creates a beautiful meditation on death, love and regret. The mother who works in a factory returns from his workplace with sweetmeats like “half-a-dozen jobay-ladoo and some shingara and aloo-chop, savouries for her three children” (Shekhar 130) only to see her son one last time. Death comes for us all, but it's difficult to bear when it comes for a child. Shekhar shows the tormented mother who lost her son to fever.

First published in *The Four Quarters Magazine*, “Merely a Whore” traverses through the bestial terrain of prostitution through Sona, the protagonist, who doesn't have control over her circumstances. Sona is a sex-worker in “the buzzing red-light district of Lakhipur, a coal-mining town...” (Shekhar 144) who falls in love with one of her clients, Nirmal and hopes for rescue from her ill profession. The story also slightly focuses on the struggle and oppression of another female character called Jharna-di, the owner of the brothel house where Sona works. The title of this paper is taken from this very story where Jharna-di sighed with a burdened grief: “This life will not let us escape. All we can ensure is that we do not end up living like this.” (Shekhar 145)

Feminism seeks to address the inequalities or disparities that exist between men and women in a society. Although these stories by Hansda Sowvendra Shekhar mainly depict the lives of Santhals from the Jharkhand region, constantly struggling to live their life with dignity in this mineral-rich land, they also portray the disparities that are predominant in the sphere of Santhal society. The characters like Talamai Kisku, Sulochona, Gita, Baso-jhi, Subhashini, Sona and Jharna-di in the collection may/may not be real but the pain, struggle and the desire for self-assertion as portrayed through the characters is very much relevant to the present scenario of most of the tribal society in India.

Women and the Commune:

Gender roles in contemporary tribal society are still rigid, and at the same time, loosely defined. Men work and earn money while wives/women stay at home, cook, sew and take care of the children- still considered only as ‘complementary’ to men or only a domestic help. In most cases, this model is the standard of the Santhal families. In few other cases, due to extreme poverty, the women seem to earn their own bread in order to survive in an exploitative society. Shekhar, in his stories, seems to depict both the sides with equal emphasis.

In “Baso-jhi”, we see characters like Pushpa, wife of Soren-babu, and Baso-jhi [Basanti], their domestic help who stay at home, cook and run the family. Baso-jhi, after being expelled by her sons from her own house and finally finding refuge in Pushpa’s house, tries to serve the family to her best. She brings water, sweeps the entire house clean and washes the clothes.

In Baso-jhi, Pushpa found a baby-sitter, a house-keeper, a laundrywoman, a vegetable-chopper, a masala-grinder, a fish-scaler, a back-scrubber, a scalp-masseuse, a confidante and a companion. (Shekhar 117)

Before Baso-jhi came to their house, Pushpa had to perform all the household ‘duties’ of her husband and their children. She didn’t have the scope to work outside to earn and help her family, even though it was getting tougher for Soren-babu to make the both ends meet.

While Soren-babu was a happy father, his wife was a beleaguered mother. Most of her time was spent- or wasted, as she felt- in getting the children to do their lesson, keeping

them from mischief or watching too much TV...So poor Pushpa would be kept on her toes throughout the day. (Shekhar 117)

Again in “Eating with the Enemy”, Sulochona and Mohini represents the women who are nothing but the sex toys for the male dominating society. Their identity centers on getting married or being the wife of someone. Sulochona though works as a servant in her neighbor and earns her livelihood; her self-assertion is limited to her being the wife of her husband Dinanath. Sulochona was not that lucky. Her husband was “as bad as her father...marriage proved to be the second round of misery in Sulochona’s life” (Shekhar 61). And when Dinanath brings another woman Mohini as his wife, Sulochona becomes aggressive and determines to grab control of her own life. Their psyche is so much bent and domesticized by the male perspective that when she looks for a name for her elder daughter, she was offered, by her friend, a name like Sitamata, she could only think, “she will have the qualities of the goddess. When she grows up, she will find a good husband. She will live happily all her life” (Shekhar 62). Mohini’s story is a little different. She used to run a desi-liquor *bhati* that Dinanath patronized. They fell in love ...and then brought her home as his mistress....That was all Mohini wanted. She came from a poor family. Had she carried on selling alcohol, she would have also ended up selling her body” (Shekhar 65).

On the other hand, Shekhar also portrays the characters and lives of *bajar-kami-kuri-ko* [working women] like Talamai Kisku, Sona, Jharna-di and Subhashini and to some extent the life of Gita. Though these women work to earn their own bread, they aren’t far away from exploitations caused by patriarchal society. In “November Is the Month of Migration”, though Talamai goes to work with her family and friends to the paddy fields of Bardhaman, in order to quench her hunger, she sells herself to a RPF *jawan* [soldier] in exchange of two pieces cold bread *pokora* and a fifty-rupee note. In “Merely a Whore”, the characters like Sona and Jharna-di is presented in their great potentials. They both work as prostitutes in the red-light district of Lakkhipur. They earn money and have financial liberties but dirt they are sunk in is sucking them deep inside it rapidly. Their identity is limited to their body, their flesh as the author rightly states, “fresh meat always attracts more flies” (Shekhar 146). Subhashini, in “Desire, Divination, Death”, although works in a rice mill, she lost her son Kunaram to a fever due to lack of money and proper availability of treatment. While her son lies half-dead-on bed, she had to work in the mill to survive:

‘Your son is running such a high fever and you are here to work! Are you mad?’

‘It’s fine. I’ll manage.’...

‘He won’t deduct your wages...’ (Shekhar 139)

Women and Ecology:

Ecofeminism can be best defined as a movement that sees a connection between the exploitation and degradation of the natural world and the subordination and oppression of women. Women have, according to the doctrines of ecofeminism, an affirmative and close relationship with nature. Most certainly it is due to the female reproductive role and mothering nature, which brings them closer to the rhythm of nature. Arpita Mukhopadhyay in *Feminisms* (2016) points out,

The role of women as nurturers renders them more vulnerable to the consequences of the ecological destruction. Ecofeminists believe that there exists a direct link between the oppression of nature and the oppression of women; sexism and naturism are inseparable. (106)

Ecofeminism seeks to explore the imbalance that is created due to the dualism of patriarchy- male over female, culture over nature, and this imbalance can be rightly addressed by connecting nature with women. Shekhar in some of his stories has successfully established this link between oppression of women and exploitation of nature. In “Merely a Whore”, the anonymous author describes how with the plantation of more and more coal mines in Lakkipur the exploitation of both nature and women rises rapidly. It not only shows the plundering of ‘mother nature’ with the formation of coal mines, but also it constantly brings out the plight of the women who work as sex-workers in that district. The plight of Jharna-di, Sona and others is aptly visible when the author states,

...they were forced to do with many men several times a day once the mines began operations... villages fell, a town rose: Lakkipur, the coal mine town. Mud houses fell, concrete ones mushroomed. Roads, police outputs, a railway station, a bus depot, shops, market, a slum and the busiest red-light area in the whole of the mining zone. (Shekhar, 147)

Shekhar depicts how in the capitalist patriarchal model, the male tendency of treating nature as a commodity to be used and harnessed is extended to their intention of treating women's body as a sexual and reproductive commodity.

In "Eating with the Enemy", running away from the oppression caused by their drunk, exploitative fathers, Sulochona and Subhadra found refuge in the lap of nature. They ended up just "a kilometer-and-a-half away from home, on the north bank of the Subarnarekha river" (Shekhar 59). They first decided to kill themselves but the river became their refuge and they changed their mind. They then both cried like never before. After they were done, Sulochona and Subhadra "walked down to the Subarnarekha, washed their hands, threw water on their eyes and faces, dried themselves, made themselves presentable and, promising to stick with each other during unhappy times, walked back to their homes" (Shekhar 61). Maria Mies, a sociologist and an eminent theorist of ecofeminism, points out that since women are more involved than men in daily life, they are more engaged with the elements of nature. Both Mies and Vandana Shiva, another influential ecofeminist, condemn the capitalist and patriarchal tendency of eliding differences and imposing sameness.

The Glass Ceiling and Doubly Oppressed Voice:

First popularized in a 1986 *Wall Street Journal* article, the "glass ceiling"² concept discussed the corporate hierarchy and how invisible barriers seemed to be preventing women from advancing in their careers past a certain level. This idea can also be applied to the "subaltern" studies where certain class of people lack the mainstream voice and fails to achieve what they desire for. The word subaltern, according to Spivak's 'Can the Subaltern Speak?', signifies the subordinate groups of South Asia, who were marginalised based on caste, class, race, gender, age and office. Shekhar's female characters, be it imaginary, are not devoid of this exploitative glass ceiling. Having lost all her way out, Sona tries to escape the labyrinth of brothel house only to find herself trapped more and more in it. At some point she finds her liberty in the form of Nirmal but again she fails to climb that ladder of freedom. Some invisible glass wall is drawing her back to her earlier position as a sex-worker. Gita in "Blue Baby" tries her best to escape the mismatched marriage by plotting against her own husband. She conceived

her lover’s child inside her. She expected that her lover Dilip would come to claim her but even the last chance died out for her when she lost all the contacts of Dilip. For Talamai Kisku in “November Is the Month of Migration”, her life moves around a never-ending circle where most of the women of her age do the same to earn their basic sustenance.

Their voice is subjugated as they belong to marginalized society. They face the cruelty of patriarchy in their society, and outside they are exploited by the *diku* [non-tribal] people. Here they aren’t the victims of foreign colonialism at the first place. Rather they are the victims of poverty and hunger. In this manner they are no less than doubly colonized, doubly marginalized and doubly oppressed. Shekhar’s attempt to bring out such oppression is very much visible in his writings, and this attempt was rigorously criticized by the patriarchs of the Santhal community. “November Is the Month of Migration” is the particular short story that infuriated many readers and critics and Shekhar was accused for objectifying the Adivasi women. However, there was another reading to the short story that “clearly indicated that in no way was the story meant to titillate but reflected the painful, disturbing and sad state of Adivasi for whom every day was a struggle to survive” (Tripathi 194).

Empowerment vs. Disempowerment:

It is quite hard to separate the characters portrayed by Shekhar as empowered or disempowered. The way the characters are represented in the stories is a mixture of both empowered and exploited or disempowered characters. Gita, in “Blue Baby” tries to find her power through her aspired job of a teacher. On one hand she attempts her best to achieve what she wants by pursuing her job as a teacher and by getting pregnant beforehand to escape her mismatched marriage. And on the other hand, she is denied her power when her ex-lover Dilip refuses to take her back to their love life. Now disappointed and broken Gita “determined to cast every last clot of Dilip’s blood out of her body” (Shekhar 111). Sona and Jharna-di, in “Merely a Whore” find themselves empowered when they rule over men: “Sona was a dream; everyone else was merely a whore” (Shekhar 145). On the other hand, they fall prey to the clutches of phallogocentric, flesh loving males and lose their way out. Subhashini, in “Desire, Divination, Death”, although works in a rice-mill and seems to be empower apparently, loses her power when she lost her only son to mere fever due to lack of money. Baso-jhi in the eponymous story seems to get empowered and importance when she singlehandedly runs her family and raises her

children and protects her property from the hands of “scheming relatives and salacious leers” (Shekhar 125). But soon after her sons’ marriages she felt disempowered all of a sudden when she was accused by her own sons as *dahni* [witch] and expelled from her house. Empowerment or the state of being empowered, for women, doesn’t simply mean to gain physical power to compete with men. Rather the real empowerment is the granting of political, social or economic power to an individual or group. Disempowerment is something that is done to others. Disempowerment it is typically aimed at removing the factors that facilitate empowerment. Empowerment, for the ‘Third World women’³, is something that they only aspire for and never acquire; and finally end up being the voiceless ‘silent subaltern’. Shekhar’s women characters like Baso-jhi, Sona, Jharna-di, Talamai Kisku, Sulochona and Gita seem to get disempowered or powerless in the hand of the men or the circumstances created by men. Spivak argues that the subaltern cannot speak for herself as the double bind of colonialism and patriarchy silence her. In this respect they are again made ‘subalterns’ (Spivak pp. 44-45); they are denied subject position in the mainstream discourses. The subalternity of the women, especially in the colonial or postcolonial context, is more acute, since she has neither conceptual language nor the audience of the native men [here both Santhal and non-tribal men] who would hear them. It is not that subaltern women cannot speak, but “they have been denied the subject position in the mainstream discourse and are therefore condemned to silence” (Mukhopadhyay 104). Such is the portrayal of Hansda Sowvendra Shekhar that the women characters find their voice and lose it immediately, gather their power and lose it in eye’s blink. Power for them is like both a dream and a nightmare.

Conclusion:

Shekhar’s portrayal can be best described as a literature of protest. It takes an in-depth study of ruthless subordination of women at the hands of patriarchy and their consequent marginalization and victimization. Shekhar felicitates the relation between caste and women’s subordination as one of the important points of his conceptualization of women oppression. The characters are from different generations, from different age groups, but what equate them are their sufferings, exploitations and the disparities they are subjected to. Their sufferings and exploitations caused by men equate the exploitation caused to ‘mother nature’. Their continuous attempt to escape the never-ending loop of patriarchal subjugation seems futile under the ‘glass

ceiling’ created by male orthodoxy. Their struggle for gaining power, voice and self-assertion falls prey to the rigid societal labyrinth.

Short stories are not very easy to engage with or sometimes they are not complete in themselves. But Shekhar’s stories seem to be the most complete in pointing out various, diversified aspects of women lives. This study is not only literary criticism, rather it also provides a cure to the malady, and that is more and more research and strategic implementation of the findings to ensure liberation and emancipation of women. So, in a sense, what Shekhar is doing in his writings is targeting and challenging both the moral and social perspectives which he sees as responsible for such oppression and marginalization. Pointing out the lacunas in the society he urges for the solution to his readers. Shekhar might be the first to depict the Santhal adivasi society and its role in subjugating the women, but the depiction is undoubtedly and unquestionably universal.

Notes:

1. ‘Phallogocentrism’ is a combination of ‘phallogocentrism’ [centring on the phallus] and ‘logocentrism’ [word centred]. Phallogocentrism “implies a phallus centric thought process and language use” (Mukhopadhyay 137). The language is linear, structured, decisive and masculinist.
2. The glass ceiling is a metaphor referring to an invisible barrier that prevents women and minorities or in other word the “subalterns” from being moved to higher roles in a male-dominated hierarchy. The barriers are most often “unwritten, meaning those women are more likely to be restricted from advancing through accepted norms and implicit biases rather than defined corporate policies” (Peters par. 2).
3. Chandra Talpade Mohanty critiques the representation of “the Third World woman as the ‘silent’ subject colluding with her othering and voicelessness. She argues that ‘native women’ are situated at the intersection of multiple discourses and thus possess multiple subjectivities. This challenges the assumptions about ‘native women’ as the ‘silent subaltern’” (Mukhopadhyay 92).

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