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RESEARCH ARTICLE

Negotiating Identity, Marginality and Resistance: A Critical Study of Hansda Sowvendra Shekhar's Short Stories

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Abstract
Hansda Sowvendra Shekhar occupies an important position in contemporary Indian English literature because of his sustained engagement with Adivasi life, particularly the experiences of the Santhal community of Jharkhand and eastern India. His short-story collection *The Adivasi Will Not Dance: Stories* (2015) presents a complex literary representation of a community frequently marginalized in dominant narratives of Indian modernity. Rather than romanticizing the Adivasi as an untouched inhabitant of an idyllic natural world, Shekhar depicts individuals negotiating poverty, displacement, cultural prejudice, gender oppression, migration, sexuality, superstition, state power, and the pressures of modernization. The present paper examines selected stories from the collection through the theoretical perspectives of postcolonialism, subaltern studies, cultural identity, and resistance. It argues that Shekhar's fiction complicates the conventional binary between the "mainstream" and the "marginal" by demonstrating that marginality operates through several intersecting structures of power. Stories such as "They Eat Meat!", "November Is the Month of Migrations," "Baso-jhi," "Desire, Divination, Death," "Merely a Whore," and "The Adivasi Will Not Dance" demonstrate how food, land, labour, sexuality, gender, language, and cultural practices become sites of political struggle. The paper further explores Shekhar's use of Indian English infused with Santhali cultural registers and argues that his narrative method constitutes an important form of literary resistance. His fiction does not merely speak *about* Adivasis; it attempts to challenge the representational structures through which Adivasis have historically been rendered invisible, exotic, or stereotypical.

Keywords: Adivasi literature, subalternity, identity, resistance, displacement, postcolonialism, marginality

Introduction
Indian literature has historically contained numerous representations of communities situated at the margins of dominant social structures. Yet Adivasi communities have frequently remained underrepresented in the mainstream literary imagination. Where they have appeared, they have often been constructed through the gaze of outsiders—as primitive, exotic, uncivilized, naturally harmonious, or culturally backward. Contemporary Adivasi writing challenges such representations by enabling indigenous writers to narrate their own experiences and cultural realities.

Hansda Sowvendra Shekhar is one of the significant contemporary writers associated with this movement. A Santhal writer from Jharkhand, Shekhar has brought Adivasi experience into contemporary Indian English literature through fiction that refuses to romanticize either poverty or indigenous culture. His short-story collection *The Adivasi Will Not Dance: Stories*, published by Speaking Tiger in 2015, consists of ten stories situated largely within Santhal social and cultural contexts.

The collection includes "They Eat Meat!", "Sons," "November Is the Month of Migrations," "Getting Even," "Eating with the Enemy," "Blue Baby," "Baso-jhi," "Desire, Divination, Death," "Merely a Whore," and "The Adivasi Will Not Dance." These stories are diverse in subject matter and narrative situation. Shekhar

himself has emphasized that the stories were written at different times and do not necessarily follow a single predetermined theme. Nevertheless, taken together, they create a powerful literary archive of Adivasi existence.

The central concern of this paper is to examine how Shekhar transforms the short story into a site for negotiating identity, marginality and resistance. The argument is that his fiction moves beyond the simple representation of victimhood. His characters experience oppression, but they also possess desires, contradictions, agency, humour, sexuality, anger, ambition and moral complexity. In this sense, Shekhar's fiction resists both external stereotyping and internal romanticization.

Adivasi Literature and the Politics of Representation

The emergence of Adivasi literature must be understood within the broader politics of representation. Literature is never completely separated from questions of power because the ability to represent a community is itself connected to social and cultural authority.Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak's influential essay "Can the Subaltern Speak?" draws attention to the difficulty of allowing marginalized subjects to become visible within dominant systems of representation. For Spivak, the problem is not simply whether the oppressed physically possess a voice but whether dominant structures allow that voice to be heard and recognized as meaningful.

This theoretical problem is particularly relevant to Adivasi literature. The Adivasi subject has historically been represented through administrative, anthropological, colonial, developmental and literary discourses. Such representations can transform living communities into objects of knowledge.Shekhar's fiction attempts to reverse this representational direction. His characters are not merely objects of anthropological observation. They occupy the centre of the narrative. They speak, desire, suffer, quarrel, migrate, love, resist and make morally complicated choices.

Abin Chakraborty's study of "The Adivasi Will Not Dance" argues that Shekhar's writing foregrounds subaltern consciousness and agency rather than presenting Adivasis as stereotypical victims. This distinction is crucial. Shekhar's project is not simply to demonstrate that Adivasis suffer. It is to show how they experience the structures that produce suffering and how they respond to those structures.

Food, Cultural Identity and Everyday Resistance

One of the most striking examples of cultural politics appears in "They Eat Meat!" The story revolves around Panmuni and Biram Soren, a Santhal couple who move to Vadodara. Their experience demonstrates that marginalization does not necessarily require physical violence. It can operate through everyday cultural practices.

Food becomes the principal symbol of this process.The Santhal family's meat-eating practices are treated as incompatible with the dominant cultural expectations surrounding them. The apparently ordinary act of eating meat becomes a political act because it marks cultural difference.

The significance of the story lies in the fact that food is transformed from a biological necessity into a marker of identity. What one eats becomes connected with questions such as:

- Who belongs?
- Who is considered respectable?
- Whose cultural practices are regarded as "pure"?
- Who has the authority to define acceptable behaviour?

Recent scholarship on the story similarly identifies food as a site where cultural identity, domination and resistance intersect.

Shekhar therefore demonstrates that cultural hegemony does not always announce itself through spectacular political institutions. It may appear in the kitchen, dining room, rented house or neighbourhood.The story is particularly significant because it challenges the assumption that urban modernity automatically produces social equality. The city may provide employment and infrastructure while simultaneously demanding cultural conformity.

The Soren family's experience illustrates what may be termed **cultural citizenship**: they are formally citizens,

yet their complete acceptance is conditional upon their willingness to modify their cultural practices.
Food thus becomes a form of resistance. To continue eating according to one's own tradition becomes an assertion of identity.

Migration and the Economics of the Adivasi Body

Migration is another recurring feature of Shekhar's fiction. "November Is the Month of Migrations" is particularly significant because it connects migration with economic vulnerability and sexual exploitation.Migration in the story is not presented as an entirely voluntary journey towards opportunity. Rather, it emerges from structural poverty. When traditional economic structures fail to provide sustainable livelihoods, individuals are pushed towards urban and semi-urban spaces.
The migrant body becomes economically exploitable.
The story's treatment of sexuality is deliberately uncomfortable because Shekhar refuses to sanitize poverty. His representation suggests that sexual exploitation can become part of the survival economy of marginalized women.This is important for Adivasi literary studies because it complicates romantic ideas about indigenous women's relationship with nature and community. The Adivasi woman is not represented as an abstract symbol of purity or ecological harmony. She is a human subject negotiating hunger, sexuality, economic necessity and social vulnerability.The collection's publisher describes Talamai Kisku as a migrant from the Santhal Pargana who travels to West Bengal in search of work and encounters sexual exploitation.
Shekhar therefore establishes a connection between economic displacement and bodily vulnerability. The loss of land and livelihood does not end with economic deprivation; it enters the intimate sphere.

Gender and the Double Marginalization of Adivasi Women

Gender constitutes another crucial dimension of Shekhar's short fiction. His women characters frequently occupy positions of vulnerability not only because they belong to a marginalized ethnic community but also because they inhabit patriarchal structures.
"Baso-jhi" is particularly important in this context.
The story centres on an elderly woman who becomes associated with witchcraft. Her marginalization demonstrates how superstition can become a mechanism of social exclusion. Yet the story also complicates the idea that oppression comes exclusively from external institutions.
Baso-jhi is persecuted within her own community.
This is one of the strengths of Shekhar's writing. He does not create an idealized Adivasi society untouched by patriarchy, superstition, greed or violence. His criticism is internal as well as external.
Recent critical discussion of the collection identifies "Baso-jhi" as an important example of Shekhar's critique of witch-hunting and internal social oppression.
The story consequently resists a simplistic opposition between "good indigenous society" and "bad mainstream society." Shekhar recognizes that communities themselves contain structures of power.
This is particularly significant for feminist readings of Adivasi literature. Adivasi women can experience oppression at multiple levels:
state → market → community → family → gender
Their marginality is therefore intersectional.
The woman may simultaneously be poor, indigenous, female, economically dependent and socially vulnerable.

"Desire, Divination, Death": Poverty and the Ethics of Survival

"Desire, Divination, Death" expands Shekhar's exploration of poverty and family responsibility. The story foregrounds the tension between emotional attachment and material necessity.
The condition of poverty is not merely represented as lack of money. It reorganizes relationships.
A parent may have to choose between caring for a sick child and earning a livelihood. Such choices reveal the violence of poverty because the individual is placed in situations where every available option contains suffering.
The title itself establishes a movement from human desire to supernatural interpretation and finally to death.

The story demonstrates the limitations of purely individual explanations of suffering. Illness, poverty and death cannot be understood independently from social structures.

In this respect, Shekhar's fiction has an important political dimension even when it does not directly mention the state. Political structures become visible through their consequences in everyday life.

Sexuality, Labour and the Dehumanized Female Body

"Merely a Whore" is another important story for examining gender and sexuality.

The title itself exposes the social tendency to reduce a woman to her profession. The term "whore" becomes a linguistic mechanism through which the woman's complete humanity is erased.

Shekhar challenges this reduction by representing the woman's emotional and psychological complexity.

She desires love and dignity, and her sexuality does not eliminate her humanity.

The story therefore asks an important question: Who has the right to define a woman?

If society defines her exclusively through sexual labour, then her emotional life becomes invisible.

The story also demonstrates how poverty and sexuality intersect. Prostitution is not treated merely as an individual moral failure; it is embedded in economic circumstances.

Consequently, Shekhar's treatment of sexuality can be read through the framework of structural violence.

Development, Displacement and the Politics of Land

The most politically explicit story in the collection is undoubtedly "The Adivasi Will Not Dance."

The story's protagonist, Mangal Murmu, is an elderly Santhal performer whose troupe is expected to perform at a state-sponsored event associated with a power project.

The contradiction is immediately apparent.

The Adivasi community is expected to entertain the very political and economic forces that threaten its land.

The dance therefore becomes a political symbol.

Mangal's refusal to dance transforms cultural performance into political resistance. The title itself announces this transformation: the Adivasi will not perform cultural happiness for a system that produces Adivasi dispossession.

The story was inspired by events surrounding a proposed thermal power project and anxieties about displacement.

The power plant becomes a symbol of developmental modernity.

In conventional developmental discourse, industrialization signifies progress. Shekhar complicates this assumption by asking:

Progress for whom?

If industrial development requires the displacement of indigenous communities, then the idea of "development" cannot be understood as universally beneficial.

The story therefore exposes the contradiction between nationalist rhetoric and indigenous dispossession.

Mangal's resistance is significant because he refuses the role assigned to him by the dominant order. The state wants the Adivasi as performer; Mangal becomes a political speaker.

His body is expected to dance.

His voice chooses to protest.

This transformation is central to the story's politics.

Language as Cultural Resistance

Shekhar's use of language is another important aspect of his literary practice.

Although he writes in English, his English is frequently marked by Indian linguistic structures, Santhali cultural terms, idioms and registers.

This produces a hybrid linguistic space.

Esterino Adami argues that Shekhar's fiction reshapes Indian English through Santhali borrowings and culturally specific registers.

This linguistic strategy is significant because standard English has historically functioned as a language associated with institutional and cultural authority.

By incorporating Santhali expressions and cultural concepts into English narrative, Shekhar reverses the traditional hierarchy.
English becomes a vehicle for Santhali experience.
The process may therefore be understood as linguistic decolonization.
The Adivasi does not have to abandon indigenous cultural identity in order to enter English literature. Instead, English itself becomes transformed through contact with Santhali cultural experience.
Language thus becomes another site of negotiation between the local and the global.

Nature, Land and Ecological Dispossession

Land occupies a central position in the Adivasi imagination, and Shekhar's stories repeatedly connect land with identity.
For marginalized indigenous communities, land is not simply a commodity.
It is:

- livelihood,
- memory,
- ancestry,
- culture,
- community,
- spirituality,
- identity.

Therefore, displacement is not simply geographical relocation.
It is a form of cultural violence.
The collection's setting in the mineral-rich regions of Jharkhand is particularly important because the natural resources of these regions have historically attracted mining and industrial interests. Contemporary scholarship has also examined Shekhar's fiction through the concept of “slow violence,” particularly in relation to coal and environmental degradation.
Mining and industrialization can therefore be read as processes that transform landscapes while simultaneously transforming human lives.
The land becomes economically valuable to the state and corporations precisely when it becomes culturally endangered for the community inhabiting it.
This creates a fundamental conflict:
land as commodity versus land as home.
Shekhar's fiction consistently privileges the latter perspective.

Beyond Victimhood: Complexity and Internal Critique

One of the most important features of Shekhar's fiction is that it avoids presenting Adivasis exclusively as victims.
His characters possess flaws.
They can be corrupt, jealous, violent, sexually complicated, ambitious or morally questionable.
This realism is crucial because excessive victimization can become another form of stereotyping.
A community represented only through suffering can become an object of pity rather than a community of complete human beings.
Shekhar therefore presents middle-class Santhal characters as well as extremely poor ones. Critical scholarship has noted that the collection offers a rare representation of middle-class Santhal life. Stories such as “Sons” demonstrate that Adivasi society is internally differentiated.There are class distinctions, generational conflicts and differences in access to education and employment.This creates a more sophisticated understanding of Adivasi society.Shekhar's project is consequently not one of cultural glorification. It is a project of cultural self-representation.Self-representation permits both celebration and criticism.

Resistance and the Politics of Refusal

Resistance in Shekhar's stories often emerges through refusal.
The characters resist by refusing:

- cultural assimilation,
- food restrictions,
- imposed identities,
- sexual objectification,
- patriarchal definitions,
- superstition,
- displacement,
- political spectacle.

This makes refusal a significant political category.
Mangal's refusal to dance is the most obvious example, but the same principle operates elsewhere.
Panmuni's attachment to her food practices constitutes cultural resistance.
Women who refuse prescribed roles enact gender resistance.
Characters who preserve cultural memories resist cultural erasure.
The importance of refusal lies in its simplicity.
Resistance does not always require institutional political power.
Sometimes the powerless person possesses only the power to say:
No.
Mangal's “no” becomes powerful precisely because the state expects compliance.

The Short Story as a Form of Subaltern Testimony

The short-story form is especially suitable for Shekhar's literary project.
The short story can capture moments of crisis without requiring a large historical narrative.
A small event—a meal, a journey, a conversation, an illness, a performance—can reveal an entire structure of social power.
This is one reason the stories feel politically powerful despite their relatively ordinary plots.
A landlord's comment about food reveals cultural hegemony.
A migration reveals economic exploitation.
A woman's accusation of witchcraft reveals patriarchy and superstition.
A dance performance reveals the politics of development.
The everyday therefore becomes political.
This resembles the logic of subaltern history: history is not only produced through national events and political leaders but also through the experiences of ordinary people.
Shekhar's stories recover these “little histories” of Adivasi existence. Scholarship on the collection has similarly described the stories as contributing to a reconfiguration of marginalized histories within the literary imagination.

Critical Limitations and Areas for Further Study

Although Shekhar's fiction has made an important contribution to Adivasi representation, a critical reading should also recognize its complexities.First, the representation of Adivasi identity sometimes risks producing a strong opposition between indigenous culture and mainstream society.Second, the treatment of women requires further feminist investigation. Although women occupy significant positions in the collection, questions of agency, sexuality and patriarchal structures remain open to interpretation.Third, the relationship between Adivasis and other marginalized communities deserves greater attention. Recent criticism has argued that some stories could more fully explore solidarity between Adivasi, Dalit, Muslim and other marginalized groups.These limitations do not diminish Shekhar's achievement. Rather, they demonstrate that his fiction

provides a rich field for continued research.

Conclusion

Hansda Sowvendra Shekhar's short stories constitute an important intervention in contemporary Indian English literature. *The Adivasi Will Not Dance* challenges dominant representations of Adivasi life by moving the indigenous subject from the margins of literary observation to the centre of narrative experience.The collection's significance lies not simply in its depiction of poverty and suffering but in its representation of **agency, contradiction and resistance**.

In "They Eat Meat!", food becomes an assertion of cultural identity. In "November Is the Month of Migrations," migration exposes the relationship between poverty and sexual exploitation. "Baso-jhi" reveals the violence of superstition and patriarchy. "Desire, Divination, Death" examines the intimate consequences of poverty and illness. "Merely a Whore" questions the reduction of women to sexual identities. Finally, "The Adivasi Will Not Dance" transforms cultural performance into an act of political resistance.Across these stories, Shekhar demonstrates that marginality is not a single condition. It is produced through the intersection of ethnicity, class, gender, landlessness, cultural prejudice and economic exploitation.

Most importantly, Shekhar refuses to romanticize the Adivasi. His characters are neither noble primitives nor helpless victims. They are complex human beings.

His fiction consequently performs two interconnected tasks: **it exposes structures of oppression and restores individuality to those whom those structures attempt to erase.**

The refusal to dance in the title story therefore acquires a symbolic significance beyond the immediate narrative. It represents the refusal to become an ornament of a developmental spectacle that destroys the very community whose culture it seeks to display.

The Adivasi will not dance because the Adivasi has begun to speak.

And Shekhar's literature makes that speech visible within the institutional space of Indian English literature.

His contribution can therefore be understood as both literary and political: he expands the thematic boundaries of Indian English fiction while challenging the epistemological structures through which indigenous communities have traditionally been represented. In doing so, his short stories become not merely narratives of marginality but literary acts of cultural assertion, memory and resistance.

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