

# Reenvisioning Equity: The Voice of Adivasi Women as Represented in The Mysterious Ailment of Rupi Baskey

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## Abstract:

Gender struggle is a quite common and recurrent theme in contemporary fiction. It explores the challenges and inequalities faced by certain genders in the society. Gender in the context of cultural limitations refers to the ways in which cultural norms and expectations limit gender roles and create gender based disparities. This is a complex issue that requires critical examination and needs to be addressed. It is crucial to challenge such practises and norms that contribute to the gender-based inequalities and limit the possibilities of progress and advancement. Such cultural and social limitations, therefore, must be dismantled in order to create a more equitable and just society that provides equal opportunities for all the genders to thrive. Women are often portrayed as victims of violence, oppression, and discrimination in fiction, and empowering women in the literary context has always taken the academia by storm. Various authors have channelised their inherent desire of an egalitarian world by contextualising female self-assurance through their characterisation. This is, however, a fact that the women characters of mainstream society gain acclaimed acknowledgement much before than the ones belonging to the marginal communities. One such community is the community of the tribals of India commonly known as the *Adivasis*. The conception of *adivasi* women as being less active and participative has always reigned the scholastic views. However, this perception has now changed its course and the tribal women have also found their voice in the characters of several authors. One such author is Hansda Sowvendra Shekhar. Hansda Sowvendra Shekhar (1983), is an Indian writer ethnically belonging to Santhal tribe, an ‘adivasi’ group of India. His background gets reflected in his stories that are rich in minute details, thereby adding deeper dimensions to a world that is deliberately neglected by the mainstream. His novel *The Mysterious Ailment of Rupi Baskey*, published in 2014, is considered as the first full-fledged Santhal novel to be written in English. It is a story about Kadamdihi, a Santhal village in Jharkhand, its people and their culture. As a sole Santhal writer writing in English, Shekhar aces up to bring the wide array of his women characters to the forefront and deviates from the usual trajectory of condescending and demeaning the community. He takes a jibe at the existing social and political order that denies the *Adivasi* women a complete access to their rights, snatching from them their sense of empowerment.

**Keywords:** gender, culture, marginal, *Adivasi*, women, equality.

Tribal societies in India, also known as *Adivasi* societies, are diverse and complex. *Adivasi* is a term used in India to refer to the indigenous or tribal people who are considered the original inhabitants

of the land. The word “Adivasi” is derived from Sanskrit, where “adi” means “original” or “earliest” and “vasi” means “inhabitant” or “resident”. India is home to a significant number of tribal or indigenous communities, with varying cultural, linguistic, and socio-economic backgrounds. These communities have distinct identities, traditions, and social structures that set them apart from the mainstream Indian society. *Adivasi* communities can be found in various states across India, including Jharkhand, Chhattisgarh, Odisha, Gujarat, Madhya Pradesh, and many others. India's tribal communities exhibit immense cultural diversity. Each community has its own unique language, customs, rituals, arts, crafts, and social practices. The cultural richness of tribal societies is often expressed through their folk dances, music, storytelling, traditional attire, and craftsmanship. They have a diverse range of livelihoods, including agriculture, forest-based activities, hunting, and gathering. *Adivasi* communities have deep connections with their ancestral lands and natural surroundings. Many tribes rely on agriculture, forest-based livelihoods, hunting, gathering, and pastoralism for sustenance. They possess rich traditional knowledge about local ecosystems, medicinal plants, and sustainable resource management. Tribal societies often have close-knit communities with strong bonds of kinship and cooperation. The family and extended kinship ties form the basis of social organisation, with lineage, clan, or village-level systems playing important roles. Decision-making and dispute resolution are often carried out collectively, with the participation of community elders or councils. However, despite of their rich cultural heritage, many *Adivasi* communities face economic challenges. Poverty, limited access to resources and markets, lack of basic infrastructure, and exploitation by non-tribal groups can hinder their socio-economic development. They have historically experienced land alienation, displacement due to development projects, and lack of access to essential and basic services such as education, healthcare, and clean water. Various social issues like caste-based discrimination, unequal power dynamics further exacerbates their marginalisation.

Gender disparity is also one among the various social issues faced by the *Adivasi* communities as the tribal societies are still patriarchal, and gender based discrimination and violence is quite common. This is a significant issue that affects the social, economic, and political status of women and makes the *Adivasi* women twice marginalised, first in the mainstream and then in their own community. While *Adivasi* societies vary across regions, there are some common challenges that the women of all the *Adivasi* communities face. For instance, access to education for *Adivasi* girls and women is often limited. Factors such as poverty, cultural norms, and distance to schools contribute to lower enrolment and higher dropout rates compared to their male counterparts. Lack of education further restricts opportunities for *Adivasi* women to acquire skills and pursue better livelihoods. *Adivasi* women face multiple health challenges, including inadequate healthcare facilities, limited awareness about reproductive health, high maternal mortality rates, and malnutrition. Limited access to quality healthcare worsens these issues, particularly in remote and marginalised *Adivasi* communities. *Adivasi* women often face various forms of discrimination, including gender-based violence, exploitation, and harassment. Traditional practices and patriarchal norms prevalent in some *Adivasi* communities perpetuate gender inequality which limits women's autonomy. In some *Adivasi* communities, land and property rights are primarily held by male members, which can further marginalise women. Lack of access to and control over land limits their economic independence and decision-making power.

These issues are now being addressed by some writers like Narayan, Mohanty, Temsula Ao, Mamang Dai, and many others. Exploring such social complexities that affect a tribal community involves

studying themes such as race, class or gender. This is what numerous writers attempt to do. Through their studies, some authors have sought to understand the complex dynamics between race and gender that impact tribal societies. One such author is Hansda Sowvendra Shekhar, an Indian author and doctor known for his works that explore the lives and experiences of marginalised communities, particularly *Adivasis*, in Jharkhand, India. Hansda Sowvendra Shekhar's writing often explores the complex interplay of tradition and modernity, the impact of social and political forces on marginalised communities, and the need for social justice and inclusivity. His works shed light on the rich cultural heritage, struggles, and resilience of *Adivasi* communities in India. In addition to his writing, Shekhar has worked as a doctor in Jharkhand, where he has witnessed firsthand the issues faced by tribal communities. His medical background and personal experiences have influenced his storytelling, enabling him to bring a unique perspective to his works. The works of Hansda bring out an additional facet to how the mainstream regards the marginalised communities, especially the marginalised women. The perception of women has undergone a change with the passing years and many writers show their female characters breaking free from traditional representations as weak-willed doormats. Modern portrayals show women as being self-assured with a strong sense of fulmination as well as high levels of ambition and confidence. The present research paper analyses the novel *The Mysterious Ailment of Rupī Baskey* authored by Hansda Sowvendra Shekhar through the lens of gender struggle. The novel takes into account a specific tribe of eastern India known as Santhal Tribe.

The Santhal tribe is one of the largest indigenous or *Adivasi* communities in India. They primarily inhabit the states of Jharkhand, West Bengal, Odisha, and Bihar, with significant populations also found in Assam, Tripura, and Bangladesh. The Santhals have a rich cultural heritage and a distinct way of life. The Santhals are believed to be one of the oldest indigenous communities in India, with a history that can be traced back several centuries. They have their own language, known as Santhali, which belongs to the Austro-Asiatic language family. Santhali is also recognized as one of the scheduled languages of India. The Santhals have a predominantly agrarian lifestyle and follow a patrilineal social system. Their society is organized into clans, known as “parhans”, and these clans form the basis of their social structure. Traditionally, Santhal villages are governed by a council of elders known as “Manjhis,” who make decisions for the entire community and Santhal women have always been an easy target of exploitation in their own community as well as in the mainstream society. They are yet to defy the bellicosity perpetrated on them. Even in the textual discourse, they are often depicted as desolated and subdued subjects whereas they yearn to be viewed as those who fight rather than those who merely survive. In this regard, Hansda’s portrayal of women is unconventional since he presents his women characters as lively and dynamic despite of their socio-economic background. In a patriarchally governed society, women can generally be divided into two categories. One who flout the norms of patriarchy and other who consider themselves to be a part of patriarchal society and adapt accordingly. Both these types are presented by Hansda through his characters.

The mother-in-law of the titular character Rupī, is named Putki. Putki along with one of her childhood friend Della are two such characters in the novel who have always lived their life to the fullest, refusing to abide by the conventional rules of the society. This is something that was totally uncustomary in an era when women were expected to follow a certain code of conduct. They constructed themselves in such a bold manner that no kind of societal lynching could affect them. Both of them were free spirited

and carefree. They would sing aloud on the roads, “Della, Putki’s soulmate, her partner-in-crime. The stories of their escapades are always deliciously titillating, which was why the women of the house of the Majhi liked to host Putki” (Hansda 11). Both of them drank life to the lees, “Putki like always would drink herself to sleep” and “Della might drink hooch and haandi like a man, she might be called a whore, but on inside, she was one of the best women the village had ever seen. Della spoke her mind always, she never lied about her whereabouts or about anything else... and was always ready to help those in need”(Hansda 14). The characters of Della and Putki tend to shed off the traditional boundaries and reverberate the spirit of unapologetically unconventional and free women. In the words of Chakravarty, “They unravel their strategic radical potential that they lead a life that is their own, in ungoverned by the usual ‘thrice oppressed’” (2012). Many words and abuses were hurled at Della and Putki for being extremely free-spirited. The members of their own community became spurious and called them names, “Chi! Chi! These girls are a disgrace, The women of Kadmadihi, especially those from the majhi gushti, would say” (Hansda 12). However, Hansda highlights the characters of Della and Putki as a reminder that society in general, and community in particular need such characters who exhibit resistance against conventionalism and the so called patriarchy. These characters defy every form of chauvinism coming from the counter gender in order to lead a free and ungovernable life full of mirth.

The prime character in the novel is the protagonist Rupi Baskey. The novel begins with the protagonist giving birth to her first born in a paddy field:

She had felt contractions before, the hardening of her abdomen, but so busy did she keep herself that she had forgotten about them. But everything came rushing back when her waters broke. She was bent over, her fingers in the mud. When she felt the warm fluid from her womb seep slowly down her thighs, she stood up, clutched at her lower back, cried loudly and toppled over into the slush. Thunder rumbled in the distance and a flock of cranes flew out of a kowha tree on the bank of the pond next to the fields. All the women working in the fields stopped what they were doing and ran to Rupi. (Hansda 3-4)

This description of a childbirth, squatting in the middle of a rice paddy, deep in slush focuses on the exceptional physical and mental strength a woman possesses. Rupi undergoes labour pain, delivers a healthy baby and gets back to work in the field only after a period of five days. Rupi knows no rest. She keeps herself busy by doing something or the other all the time. She keeps herself involved in planting, harvesting and threshing and is efficient in her work in the fields and also manages the household chores impeccably. This is why Hansda calls her as “The Strongest Woman of Kadamdihi”, which is also the title of the very first chapter of the novel. However, this strong women of Kadamdihi, whose abilities were never judged or questioned by anybody gradually becomes convinced of her inabilities and failure as a mother as well as a wife.

Rupi’s husband Sido has an extramarital relationship with a woman named Gurubari. Rupi is quite happy and excited to move with her husband to Nitra, the place where he works. She is delighted at the prospect of setting up a new home with her partner but all of her hopes are dashed to ground when she finds out that Sido’s home is already set there. Gurubari even denies Rupi a separate kitchen of her own. This points towards the fact that Gurubari is actually refusing to give Rupi the right to run her own family, as kitchen is a place in the household that is considered to be symbolic of the authority upon the family. For many house space critics also, kitchen is never just a mere place where cooking is done but rather a

symbol of authority. Gradually, Rupi begins to feel powerless in front of her and Gurubari considers herself to be the queen of the house ruling over all the family members. This lack of confidence in Rupi, induced intentionally by Gurubari becomes the root cause of her ‘mysterious ailment’ which, despite of consultancy to a number of doctors, remains incurable till the end of the novel and the protagonist gradually perishes without any kind of resistance on her part. She eventually accepts the fact that her husband belongs to Gurubari. As the author says, “Rupi couldn’t understand what her ill health had to do with Sido spending time alone with Gurubari. Sido should have been with Rupi. That was how it should have been... Rupi—sick and nagged by the feeling that she was sharing her husband and son with another woman—kept to her rooms and walked over to Gurubari’s side only when she had to cook in the common kitchen” (Hansda 110).

The character of Rupi is in direct contrast to Dulari, wife of Rupi’s brother-in-law Doso. Doso gets married to Dulari just because of the constant pressure of his family members to marry a suitable girl, as he is in love with a Kharya girl of whom his family would never approve. Dulari, “was a thin woman with a flat chest and backside. She had a small mouth with a pair of large buck teeth. She dressed plainly, too. She wasn’t the sort of woman a man like Doso would have normally fallen for. His Kharya lover was far more attractive”(Hansda 159). His only purpose behind getting married is to provide a helping hand to his family in the household chores and he continues his love relationship with the Kharya girl even after his marriage, “on most days, Doso would drink his fill and leave which ever pata he was in at the time and head to his lover’s house. After spending the night there he would return home in the morning, refreshed and entertained (Hansda 159). Doso even starts beating her if she would ask any questions. He says, “I will kick you so hard that you will go flying out of this house. I have done you favour by marrying you. Be thankful to me and don’t ask for anything more” (Hansda 164). These instances reflect on the plight of women in the society. Just because Dulari belongs to a poor family, Doso brings her home for work, starts beating her regularly, uses her whenever he wants and even continues his love affair outside. Dulari finally decides to defy the subordination she faces. She is not ready to accept the atrocities and injustice done to her. Even though, Dulari and Rupi, both suffer from a similar kind of situation, Dulari tells Rupi, “I will not share my husband or my child with anyone. I know you are too good. Good enough to share your husband and sons with another woman. I can’t be as good as you” (Hansda 163).

Dulari refuses to succumb to any unfavourable circumstances. One day, Doso’s lover unexpectedly dies of fever and diarrhoea and Dulari is branded as the culprit as she is the only beneficiary of the death. Rumours of Dulari being a practitioner of black magic spreads in the town of Kadamdihi and she allegedly becomes a witch after the death of Doso’s lover. Although there is no direct proof of Dulari practising black magic but even if she adopted the means of witchery to get rid of her plight, she gets the full advantage of it. After the death of his lover, Doso, either because of depression or because of the fear of his wife’s alleged powers becomes ‘a service lamb’. After this incident, Dulari boldly defends herself in an argument with Rupi and says:

I may be a witch, but tell me, did I have a way out? What was mine was being taken away from me. I had to claim it for myself. What other way did I have? Who would’ve helped me? No one, no one, dai. I had to help myself. I had to do everything by myself. If it meant using dahni-vidya, I was ready for that. I had to reclaim what was rightfully mine. Tell me,



dai, did I do anything wrong? I don't think so. If you are so good, use your goodness to get back what you have lost. (Hansda 184-5)

This argument of Dulari can be seen from the perspective of the actual reason of *Adivasi* women taking interest in practising black magic or *Dahni Vidya*. Women who are suppressed and bereaved of their basic rights and needs are left with no other option other than to adopt such bigoted means. Santhal women are deprived of their land and cultivation rights, so in the novel *Doso* can be seen as the symbol of land on whom Dulari has every right and it was being snatched away from her. Therefore, she thinks that what is rightfully hers can only be reclaimed through the practice of witchery. She doesn't have a sense of shame about the way she adopts to regain her right. She takes it to be a fight that she has to win. This is why she asserts, "I had to claim it for myself. What other way did I have? Who would have helped me? No one, no one, dai. I had to help myself." Nathan and Keller have also attempted to find out the truth behind the issue regarding the existence of witches and in "Witches: Through Changing Contexts Women Remain the Target", they observe, "Talking to people of the region there certainly is a strong belief in the existence of such women who practice a different form of worship labelled witchcraft, and thus— as per popular belief— gain certain powers to cause harm" (2).

The argument infuses a sense of sympathy for Dulari eventually resulting in clearing off her guilt as a *Dahni* or practitioner of witchery. It throws light on Hansda's take on *Dahni Vidya* and the reality behind its practice. This practice is a reflection of gender struggle consistently going on in the Santhal society from ages. Certain land and cultivation rights are purloined from the Santhal women by the menfolk of the community and in order to reclaim their rights, women are left with no other way except to gather secretly at night and perform all the things they are denied in the daylight or in front of the society. They access the sacred grove which they are otherwise not allowed to do, they worship the spirits and also offer sacrifices to them. The women even mock cultivate and explore new the food items in their nightly adventures. In this regard, a Norwegian missionary of the 18<sup>th</sup> century, P.O. Bodding expresses, "I am inclined to think that the practice of witchcraft by Santhal women is, to a certain extent, really secret worship, resorted to by women because they are not permitted to take part with the men directly and personally in ordinary public worship"(224). All this gives the Santhal women a sense of empowerment as Mullick also opines, "The witch stands for women's right to knowledge and access to cultivation and the witch finder represents the male dominance over land, knowledge and agriculture in the community" (350). Dulari, therefore, becomes an example of a rebel woman who leaves no stone unturned in order to get what is rightfully hers, unlike Rupi who too is under the same situation as Gurubari has usurped her husband Sido and even her elder son Jaipal. But she couldn't do anything and withers away gradually. The helplessness she faces every day is the root cause of an ailment which even the doctors could not cure. Rupi, thus, becomes the symbol of those Santhal woman who lack the courage to protest and fight against the wrongs that are being done to them. They torment their own physical and mental health and eventually perish. The only incident where Rupi raises her voice and suddenly outbursts is during her confrontation with Dulari. She attacks her without any slight provocation on Dulari's end. Rupi's vulnerability and helplessness comes out only in front of Dulari. This is probably because Dulari is her altar ego and she is the one Rupi actually wants to be but fails. Both Rupi and Dulari are victims of the same situation but respond to it quite differently.

In their fight against their own menfolk, if the Santhal women do not follow the path of witchery, they would eventually disintegrate just like Rupi who doesn't have the prowess to choose the path of survival. Even if women try to remain good and acceptable in the eyes of society, their goodness is never going to earn them their rights. This is possibly why the women who have domineering personalities and are strong willed and rebellious are more prone to go to such extent. It is in this context that Mullick says that a witch, "...is engaged in a gory struggle for her survival as a woman. She is fighting against all the taboos imposed on her and is trying to retain her power and status and protect the remnants of the social system that sanctions them" (354). Dulari stands for those women who refuse to be submissive and possess the stamina to rebel against the society which Rupi fails to do and as a consequence of this, the woman who is labelled as "The Strongest Woman of Kadamdihi" at the beginning of the novel becomes the weakest one by the end of it, primarily, because of her psychological inertness and the author describes it as "The Fall of the Strongest Woman of Kadamdihi". Now what Rupi is not able to do is accomplished by Dulari. However, her power does not come from her beauty or physical strength or ability to do the household chores immaculately as is the case with Rupi, Dulari's power comes from her knowledge and awareness of her basic rights, for the sake of which she is able to put forward a fight eventually reclaiming it. This self assurance, courage and confidence to fight for her own rights is what a Rupi lacks making Dulari, "The Next Strongest Woman of Kadamdihi".

Therefore, the novel, *The Mysterious Ailment of Rupi Baskey* vividly portrays the challenging conditions faced by women, particularly by those who belong to marginalised communities and live in a patriarchal society. The novel exposes various forms of violence, discrimination, and exploitation faced by women and highlights the difficulties they face in seeking justice and protection from such violence. Hansda, through the medium of his writing, challenges the notion of women's passivity and submission and at the same time also explores the issue of female needs and rights by delineating the extent up to which women can go in order to retrieve what is legitimately and equitably theirs.

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