

River, Memory and Resistance: A Cultural Studies Reading of Nalini Bera's Gold Sand, Gold Water

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Abstract

Contemporary Indian literature is increasingly offering a platform for the portrayal of communities that have long been excluded from mainstream cultural and literary conversations. Adivasi literature holds special importance in this movement, as it explores themes such as land, identity, memory, ecological concerns, displacement, social hierarchies, and the survival of cultural traditions. Nalini Bera's "Gold Sand, Gold Water", translated into English by Sowvendra Shekhar Hansda and published by Seagull Books in 2026, presents a meaningful depiction of the Hatua people, who live along the Subarnarekha River. Originally written in Bengali as "Subarnarenu Subarnarekha", the novel blends folklore, historical narratives, social realities, caste dynamics, ecological awareness, and the everyday life of the community.

This paper analyzes the novel using the framework of Cultural Studies. It emphasizes cultural identity, cultural memory, folklore, representation, marginalization, caste dynamics, ecological awareness, and the influence of modernity. The theoretical insights from Raymond Williams, who viewed culture as a "whole way of life," and Stuart Hall, who saw cultural identity as a process, form the basis of this analysis. The study argues that the novel functions as a cultural archive, keeping alive the memories, traditions, and experiences of a marginalized community. The Subarnarekha River is not just a physical feature but a symbol of cultural continuity and shared memory. Likewise, folklore, songs, legends, and daily practices serve as tools for preserving cultural identity. At the same time, the novel highlights how industrialization and modernity can disrupt traditional connections with land, water, and community. In the end, "Gold Sand, Gold Water" shows how literature can challenge cultural invisibility and give voice to the memories and identities of marginalized groups.

Keywords: Adivasi literature, Cultural Studies, tribal identity, cultural memory, Subarnarekha River, folklore, marginalisation, ecology, modernity, resistance.

Introduction

Literature is closely connected with the society and culture in which it is produced. A literary text does not merely tell a story; it can preserve memories, customs, beliefs, conflicts and social experiences. This becomes particularly important when literature represents communities whose histories and voices have often been excluded from mainstream cultural narratives.

Adivasi literature occupies an important position within contemporary Indian literary studies. It engages with issues such as land, forest, community, cultural identity, displacement, exploitation and resistance.

It also draws upon oral traditions, folklore, songs, myths and indigenous knowledge. Consequently, Adivasi literature can be approached not only as literary expression but also as an important cultural record.

Nalini Bera's *Gold Sand, Gold Water* is particularly significant in this context. The English translation was published by Seagull Books in 2026 and was translated by Sowvendra Shekhar Hansda. The original Bengali novel, *Subarnarenu Subarnarekha*, received the Ananda Puraskar in 2019. The novel focuses on the Hatua people associated with the Subarnarekha River and represents their social and cultural experiences. The publisher describes the novel as bringing together folklore and reality while exploring caste, forbidden love, traditional life and the effects of modern industry.

The novel is therefore suitable for a Cultural Studies analysis because its concerns extend beyond individual characters. It represents an entire cultural environment in which rivers, forests, occupations, stories, rituals, relationships and memories are interconnected.

This paper argues that *Gold Sand, Gold Water* functions as a cultural archive and a form of cultural resistance. It records a way of life that is threatened by social and economic transformation while questioning dominant ideas about development, progress and cultural value.

Culture as a Way of Life

Raymond Williams's understanding of culture is particularly useful for reading *Gold Sand, Gold Water*. Williams challenges the restricted understanding of culture as elite art or intellectual achievement. He views culture as connected with ordinary social experience and a community's "whole way of life."

This concept is clearly visible in Bera's novel. Culture is not presented through formal institutions. Instead, it exists in everyday activities, occupations, family relationships, stories, songs, beliefs, customs and relationships with the natural environment.

The Hatua community's culture is therefore inseparable from its everyday existence. The novel suggests that when traditional occupations and relationships with the land disappear, cultural identity itself becomes vulnerable.

The representation of ordinary life consequently becomes politically significant. By giving narrative importance to marginalised people and their everyday experiences, Bera challenges the assumption that only elite or officially documented histories are culturally important.

Adivasi Identity and Cultural Representation

One of the major concerns of the novel is the representation of Adivasi identity. The Hatua people are presented as members of marginalised Adivasi and Dalit communities.

However, the novel does not reduce them merely to victims of poverty or discrimination. Their world includes love, conflict, humour, beliefs, imagination, memory and cultural creativity.

This is important from a Cultural Studies perspective because marginalised communities are often represented from outside through stereotypes. Such representations can portray indigenous people either as primitive or as romantic symbols of nature.

Bera's novel offers a more complex representation. The community possesses its own systems of knowledge and cultural meaning.

The narrative therefore shifts the Adivasi subject from the margins to the centre of literary representation.

This approach corresponds with recent scholarship on Adivasi literature, which emphasises the importance of representing Adivasi subjectivity rather than treating Adivasis simply as objects of external observation.

The Subarnarekha River as Cultural Memory

The Subarnarekha River is the central geographical and symbolic presence of the novel. The river is not merely a setting. It is closely connected with the community's history, livelihood, memories and imagination. The publisher describes the river as carrying both legends and the struggles of those living along its banks. The title *Gold Sand, Gold Water* itself establishes the importance of the river. The river possesses material and cultural value. It supports human life, but it also carries stories and memories from one generation to another.

From a Cultural Studies perspective, this makes the river a cultural space. Natural landscapes acquire cultural meanings through the relationships that communities develop with them. The river therefore becomes a metaphor for cultural continuity. Its water flows continuously, just as cultural memory moves from one generation to another. Any transformation of the river or its surrounding environment consequently affects more than the physical landscape. It threatens the cultural memory associated with that landscape.

Folklore, Myth and Oral Tradition

Folklore is one of the most distinctive features of *Gold Sand, Gold Water*. The narrative combines folklore and reality rather than treating them as completely separate categories.

The novel's chapter titles themselves demonstrate the importance of folklore and cultural memory. References to forests, the Subarnarekha, the Bhadu tree, ghostly figures, elephants, sacred threads and songs create a narrative world where mythology, history and everyday life intersect.

From a Cultural Studies perspective, oral traditions function as alternative archives. Official history often records political leaders, institutions and major events. Community memory, however, can survive through: stories, songs, legends, rituals, family narratives, local beliefs. These forms of knowledge preserve cultural experiences that may never enter official historical records. Bera's novel consequently transforms oral cultural memory into written literature. The novel itself becomes an extension of the community's storytelling tradition.

Lolin and Intergenerational Cultural Memory

Young Lolín is particularly important to the cultural structure of the novel. The publisher identifies the young character as a witness to the struggles of the Hatua people. Through a young observer, the novel establishes a relationship between past, present and future. Children acquire cultural knowledge through family, community, stories, rituals and everyday experiences. At the same time, younger generations are exposed to new forms of education, technology, economic activity and social organisation. Lolín therefore symbolises the question of cultural continuity. The novel suggests that cultural survival depends partly on the transmission of memory from one generation to another. Storytelling consequently becomes an act of preservation.

Caste, Love and Social Boundaries

Caste is another important dimension of the novel. The publisher specifically refers to forbidden love th-

at challenges caste boundaries. This demonstrates that culture is also a system of social power. Caste determines relationships, marriage, status and social acceptance. Consequently, cultural identity cannot be separated from social hierarchy. The representation of forbidden love becomes significant because it challenges boundaries established by society. Love becomes a form of resistance when individuals cross cultural and caste divisions. The novel therefore demonstrates that even intimate relationships can become sites of social struggle. The personal becomes political because private choices may challenge established structures of power.

Modernity and the Erosion of Traditional Culture

The conflict between traditional life and modern industrial development is one of the novel's central concerns. The publisher notes the erosion of traditional practices under the pressure of modern industry. This raises an important Cultural Studies question: Development for whom?

Industrialisation is often presented as progress, but its consequences are not equally experienced by all communities. For marginalised communities, development can affect: traditional occupations, access to natural resources, relationships with land, community structures, cultural practices.

The novel therefore questions the assumption that modernisation is culturally neutral. The conflict is not simply between “tradition” and “modernity.” It is between different systems of value. Industrial culture may perceive land and natural resources primarily in economic terms, whereas indigenous communities may understand them through livelihood, memory, ancestry and spirituality. The novel exposes this conflict between economic development and cultural continuity.

Nature, Ecology and Cultural Identity

The relationship between nature and culture is another important feature of the novel. Forests, rivers, trees and animals occupy significant positions in its cultural landscape. The chapter structure itself demonstrates the importance of forests, rivers, trees and elephants. Nature is therefore not merely background scenery.

It is connected with: livelihood, identity, spirituality, memory, folklore, survival. This perspective is consistent with scholarship that identifies a strong relationship between Adivasi literary traditions and ecological consciousness. The novel challenges an exclusively economic understanding of nature. For the community, the destruction of a river, forest or landscape can also mean the destruction of cultural memory. Thus, environmental loss becomes cultural loss.

Landscape as Cultural Identity

The landscape of Gold Sand, Gold Water can be interpreted as an extension of community identity. A river becomes associated with stories. A forest becomes associated with livelihood. A tree becomes associated with cultural memory. A village becomes associated with ancestors and family history. Consequently, displacement from the land can involve more than economic loss. It can produce cultural dislocation. This is particularly important in the context of Adivasi communities because relationships with land frequently involve social, spiritual and historical dimensions. The novel therefore presents landscape as a living cultural archive.

Gender and Community Life

The novel's cultural world also contains significant representations of women. The presence of female

figures and stories involving marriage, love and social expectations demonstrates that women occupy an important position in the transmission of cultural memory. Women participate in maintaining family and community traditions, yet cultural structures can also impose restrictions upon them.

A Cultural Studies approach therefore avoids romanticising traditional culture. A community may possess valuable cultural traditions while simultaneously containing internal gender and social inequalities. The novel can consequently be read as presenting culture as a complex combination of continuity, conflict and change.

Translation as Cultural Transmission

The 2026 English edition introduces an important dimension of translation. The novel was originally written in Bengali and translated into English by Sowvendra Shekhar Hansda. Translation becomes especially significant when the source text represents a culturally specific community. Words connected with folklore, food, landscape, rituals, relationships and local practices may carry meanings that cannot always be transferred completely between languages. The translator therefore becomes a cultural mediator. The English translation allows the cultural experiences represented in the novel to reach readers beyond its original linguistic context. The 2026 edition can thus be understood as a new cultural space in which an important regional and Adivasi-centred narrative enters international literary discussion.

The Novel as a Counter-Archive

Gold Sand, Gold Water can also be understood as a counter-archive. Official histories often privilege states, political institutions and influential individuals. The novel instead gives importance to ordinary people and their memories.

It records: community stories, folklore, occupations, relationships, local history, cultural practices, environmental experiences. In doing so, the novel expands the meaning of history. History is not only found in official documents. It can also survive through collective memory. The novel therefore preserves cultural experiences that might otherwise disappear from mainstream historical consciousness.

Cultural Resistance

Resistance in the novel does not necessarily take the form of organised political rebellion. Remembering can be resistance. Storytelling can be resistance. Preserving songs can be resistance. Maintaining cultural practices can be resistance. Passing cultural knowledge to younger generations can be resistance. The novel itself becomes an act of resistance because it makes a marginalised community visible within contemporary literature. It refuses cultural erasure by transforming community memories into a literary narrative. This is one of the most important contributions of the novel to Cultural Studies.

Conclusion

Nalini Bera's Gold Sand, Gold Water is a significant text for studying Adivasi culture through the theoretical framework of Cultural Studies. The 2026 English translation by Sowvendra Shekhar Hansda brings the Bengali novel to a wider readership and opens new possibilities for examining questions of cultural identity, memory, caste, ecology and modernity.

The study demonstrates that the novel presents culture as a dynamic and contested process rather than a fixed inheritance. The Hatua community's identity is constructed through relationships with land, river,

folklore, family, memory and social institutions. The Subarnarekha River is particularly important because it functions simultaneously as a geographical location, source of livelihood, cultural symbol and repository of collective memory. The river connects past and present and represents cultural continuity. Folklore and oral traditions provide another important means of preserving identity. Stories, legends and songs function as alternative archives that preserve experiences not necessarily recorded by official history. The novel's treatment of caste and forbidden love demonstrates that culture is inseparable from power. Social boundaries influence relationships and determine who is permitted to belong.

Similarly, the representation of industrialisation challenges simplistic ideas of development. Modernisation may bring economic change, but it can also threaten traditional occupations, landscapes and cultural practices. The ecological dimension of the novel further demonstrates that environmental and cultural identities are interconnected. Damage to the natural environment can also produce cultural loss.

Ultimately, *Gold Sand, Gold Water* is more than a novel about a particular community. It is a literary record of memory, identity and cultural survival. It demonstrates that literature can challenge cultural invisibility by giving narrative space to communities whose histories have frequently been marginalised. The “gold” in the title can therefore be understood symbolically. Beyond the material value associated with the river lies a more enduring treasure: the cultural memory of a community and its continuing struggle to preserve identity in a rapidly changing world.

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