
Ambivalent Autonomy: Santhal Women and Patriarchal Power in The Mysterious Ailment of Rupī Baskey

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Abstract:

This paper explores Hansda Sowvendra Shekhar's *The Mysterious Ailment of Rupī Baskey* through feminist and subaltern perspectives to understand the lived experiences of Santhal women. The research examines how the novel challenges conventional portrayals of tribal womanhood and reveals the links between patriarchy, culture, and female resilience. It aims to show how Shekhar redefines the representation of Santhal women as figures of both strength and suffering who negotiate power within restrictive social structures.

The study analyzes oppression and agency through characters such as Rupī, Rupali, and Putki, who embody "ambivalent autonomy." It further interprets illness and witchcraft as cultural tools used to control and silence women. Drawing on the theories of Gayatri Spivak, Judith Butler, and Ranajit Guha, the paper situates Shekhar's narrative within wider feminist, postcolonial, and indigenous frameworks. The scope of the research extends beyond textual analysis to view the novel as a critique of patriarchal and colonial representations, emphasizing Shekhar's effort to give voice to marginalized tribal women in modern Indian English literature.

Keywords: Santhal women, Patriarchy, Subaltern studies, Witchcraft, Gender and illness

Introduction:

As a Santhal man and author, Hansda Sowvendra Shekhar stands at a unique crossroads between insider experience and literary modernity. His debut novel, *The Mysterious Ailment of Rupī Baskey* (2014), bears this dual signature—it is deeply rooted in Santhal social life while simultaneously shaped by the discipline and consciousness of modern Indian English fiction. Shekhar writes from within his culture, yet with the analytical distance of a contemporary observer, giving the novel what may be described as an "arrival" of tribal literature into the mainstream, but without sacrificing its indigenous voice. His perspective as both a medical doctor and a Santhal allows him to blend realism with myth, local cosmology with rational thought, creating a narrative where "the modern fuses with the traditional," as Chhandosree Choudhury notes (Choudhury).

Set in the fictional Santhal village of Kadamdihi, the novel revolves around Rupi Baskey, a respected woman whose mysterious illness becomes both a personal tragedy and a collective reflection of cultural belief. The villagers attribute her suffering to witchcraft, particularly the jealousy of another woman, Gurubari. Beneath this surface story of sickness and superstition lies a powerful exploration of how patriarchy, fear, and faith govern women's lives. Rupi's body becomes a symbolic text upon which her society writes its anxieties, its power struggles, and its understanding of female virtue. When Shekhar describes that "Rupi was being eaten from inside by something no doctor could cure" (87), the line resonates beyond its literal sense—it speaks to the spiritual and social maladies that afflict her world.

As a Santhal writer, Shekhar does not exoticize tribal life; he renders it with lived familiarity. His characters eat, work, love, and suffer with a sense of immediacy that distances the novel from the anthropological gaze common in earlier depictions of tribal communities. Amitayu Chakraborty observes that Shekhar's writing "resists the monolithic construction of 'the tribal woman' by foregrounding ambivalent autonomy" (77). Indeed, Shekhar's women are neither passive nor idealized; they are complex, contradictory, and deeply human.

Rupi, the protagonist, is introduced as a figure of immense physical and moral strength. She "birthed her eldest son squatting in the middle of a paddy field, shin-deep in mud and slush" (Shekhar 3), an image that captures both her intimacy with the land and her endurance as a worker and mother. Yet, this strength becomes her undoing within a patriarchal order that mistrusts powerful women. Her mysterious ailment becomes the community's way of neutralizing what it cannot control. Gurubari's alleged witchcraft, and the ensuing suspicion among women, illustrate what Mandal calls "the internalization of patriarchal discipline within the female world" (5).

The novel thus presents an ecosystem of women—Rupi, Rupali, Putki, and Gurubari—whose lives intertwine around power, pain, and survival. Each woman embodies a different mode of resistance. Rupali, Rupi's daughter-in-law, represents the modern generation; she values education and reason: "Rupali... understands the importance of education and can speak her mind with valid arguments" (Mandal 6). Putki, in contrast, asserts her independence by defying social norms and expressing her desires freely. Even Gurubari, often condemned as malicious, becomes a mirror to the social tensions that pit women against one another in patriarchal settings.

Feminist and subaltern theories provide valuable frameworks for interpreting these portrayals. Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak's question—"Can the Subaltern Speak?"—echoes throughout Shekhar's narrative (Spivak 287). The women of Kadamdihi may not articulate resistance in the political sense, yet their endurance, defiance, and silence constitute a form of speech that challenges their erasure. Judith Butler's concept of gender performativity helps explain this further: by "performing" expected roles but subtly altering them, these women reshape their identities (Butler 34). Rupali performs domestic duty but does so with

intellectual authority; Rupi fulfills maternal expectations yet remains the moral anchor of her family even in illness.

Ranajit Guha's notion of the "fragmented consciousness of the subaltern" also informs Shekhar's representation (Guha 21). The Santhal women's resistance is not organized or overt; it manifests through fragments—decisions, silences, small refusals. Rupi's illness, in this sense, becomes both a curse and a statement. Her suffering is personal, but it exposes the collective complicity of a society that sustains its hierarchies through superstition and gossip.

Shekhar's engagement with illness and witchcraft is both anthropological and symbolic. On one hand, it reflects lived Santhal practices where sickness is viewed through spiritual lenses; on the other, it critiques how these beliefs reinforce gender oppression. When Rupi's ailment resists cure, the village community rejects medicine and turns instead to fear. As the narrator observes, "No one wanted to believe the doctors; they wanted to believe what they feared" (Shekhar 118). The irony is striking, given that the author himself is a doctor—a detail that deepens the novel's critique of how modern science and traditional belief remain estranged within tribal consciousness.

As a writer positioned between two worlds—tribal and urban, indigenous and professional—Shekhar's narrative voice bridges what Virginius Xaxa describes as "the tension between tribal identity and democratic participation" (114). His fiction does not romanticize isolation but explores coexistence. The Santhal community in Rupi Baskey is portrayed as self-sustaining yet porous, steeped in ritual but touched by the outside world. Rupali's embrace of education symbolizes this intersection; she stands as a modern Santhal woman negotiating the pull of two civilizations.

This study, therefore, approaches *The Mysterious Ailment of Rupi Baskey* as both a literary and cultural text that captures the evolution of indigenous identity under patriarchal and postcolonial pressure. It argues that Shekhar's women represent ambivalent autonomy—they are constrained yet self-aware, bound yet questioning. As Mandal emphasizes, witchcraft and illness "function as both literal and metaphorical tools of oppression" (5), but through Shekhar's lens, these same motifs expose the endurance of female spirit.

Moreover, Shekhar's authorial stance challenges both colonial and metropolitan readers to re-evaluate what constitutes "modern" literature. By writing in English yet thinking in Santhali consciousness, he achieves what Chakraborty calls a "bilingual realism," where the rhythms of oral tradition meet the syntax of modern prose (79). His storytelling thus becomes a political act—asserting that tribal life need not be translated into urban idioms to be understood as literature.

In sum, as a Santhal man and modern author, Shekhar creates a literary space where indigenous experience, feminist resistance, and postcolonial discourse converge. The

Mysterious Ailment of Rupi Baskey is not merely a story of witchcraft and illness; it is an allegory of women's survival in a world of overlapping oppressions. This research aims to trace how Shekhar, through his dual perspective, transforms tribal marginality into narrative centrality, allowing Santhal women to reclaim identity, voice, and power. The following analysis explores how patriarchy, superstition, and female resilience intersect within the novel, and how, through them, Shekhar redefines what it means to speak—and to be heard—as a subaltern woman in Indian English literature.

Reclaiming Identity: Patriarchy, Power and Feminist Resistance in The Mysterious Ailment of Rupi Baskey

In Hansda Sowvendra Shekhar's *The Mysterious Ailment of Rupi Baskey*, Santhal women are not depicted as passive victims but as complex individuals negotiating between oppression and resistance. Within their community's patriarchal and cultural frameworks, they display a form of strength that can be termed ambivalent autonomy—a simultaneous coexistence of power and powerlessness.

The novel opens with Rupi, whose endurance is emblematic of the Santhal woman's intimate relationship with land and labor: "Rupi birthed her eldest son squatting in the middle of a paddy field, shin-deep in mud and slush" (Shekhar 3). Yet her eventual decline, attributed to witchcraft, transforms her body into a symbol of social and cultural anxiety. Her deterioration, compared to an alakjari vine that "engulfs the tallest... and sucks their hearts out" (Shekhar 45), reflects how superstition and patriarchy merge to suppress women's vitality.

Other women in the narrative offer alternative models of agency. Putki and Della defy moral and social expectations, choosing freedom over conformity. Critics note that they "lead a life on their own terms and flaunt all the social taboos that are supposed to pull down their freedom" (Mandal 4). Their defiance becomes a subtle rebellion against patriarchal norms, showing that resistance in the Santhal context need not be overtly political to be meaningful.

In contrast, Gurubari embodies female rivalry within patriarchal power structures. Her alleged witchcraft against Rupi becomes a metaphor for how communities internalize misogyny: "Gurubari had always envied Rupi, and people in Kadamdihi whispered that her spells had begun to eat into Rupi's body" (Shekhar 102). This dynamic illustrates how women themselves, shaped by patriarchal conditions, can perpetuate systems of suspicion and violence (Choudhury).

Rupali, Rupi's daughter-in-law, signifies a generational shift toward rationality and education. "Rupali... understands the importance of education and can speak her mind with valid arguments... [she] put things in order in an otherwise dysfunctional family" (Mandal 6). Through her, Shekhar imagines a future where Santhal women challenge restrictive traditions using knowledge and assertive voice rather than silence.

As Amitayu Chakraborty argues, Shekhar's portrayal "resists the monolithic construction of 'the tribal woman' by foregrounding ambivalent autonomy" (77). The women in the novel simultaneously inhabit and subvert patriarchal systems, demonstrating that survival itself can be an act of defiance. Rupi's endurance, Putki's defiance, Gurubari's hostility, and Rupali's assertiveness together form a spectrum of womanhood that refuses reduction to either victimhood or heroism.

Illness and witchcraft serve as central cultural frameworks through which patriarchy exercises control. The villagers' belief that "Rupi was being eaten from inside by something no doctor could cure" (Shekhar 87) underscores how women's suffering becomes socially constructed. As Mandal observes, witchcraft in the novel "functions as both a literal and metaphorical tool of oppression against women" (5). The community's preference for supernatural explanations over medical reasoning demonstrates a reliance on fear rather than rational understanding. Witchcraft accusations, particularly among tribal women, are an inherited colonial and patriarchal residue—a way of disciplining those who deviate from expected behavior.

The witch figure in the novel, Gurubari, reveals the internal contradictions of gendered identity. Her power is feared yet never acknowledged; she becomes a scapegoat for the community's anxiety. Historically, as scholars of subaltern studies note, the figure of the "witch" in indigenous societies often represents the socially marginal woman—economically independent, sexually autonomous, or outspoken (Guha 21). By casting such women as witches, patriarchal order reasserts its dominance while disguising the act as communal protection. Shekhar's representation of Gurubari thus mirrors how patriarchal violence is often naturalized through folklore and belief systems.

At the same time, illness becomes a metaphor for both physical decay and moral corruption within the social body. The failure of medical intervention symbolizes the conflict between modernity and traditional belief. Rupali's frustration—"No one wanted to believe the doctors; they wanted to believe what they feared" (Shekhar 118)—exposes this tension. The reliance on witchcraft and spiritual cures shows how collective faith can trap individuals, particularly women, within cycles of guilt and helplessness. Yet, Rupi's endurance through this ordeal transforms her suffering into quiet resistance. She neither curses nor retaliates; instead, she embodies an unspoken moral power that unsettles the same society that condemns her.

From a feminist and subaltern perspective, Shekhar's work reclaims the silenced voices of women who exist at the margins of both caste and gender hierarchies. Spivak's question—"Can the Subaltern Speak?"—is not answered through rhetoric but through the everyday lives of women who speak through action (Spivak 287). Rupi's silent suffering, Rupali's logical defiance, and Putki's social independence represent layered forms of agency that challenge dominant definitions of empowerment. In tribal contexts, where voice is often

collective rather than individual, Shekhar shows that resistance can also mean endurance, care, and survival.

Virginius Xaxa's observation that tribal identity is always mediated by modernity's intrusion helps illuminate Shekhar's method of storytelling (Xaxa 114). The tension between traditional spirituality and modern rationality parallels the gender divide between superstition and agency. Rupali's embrace of education and logic places her at the intersection of two evolving worlds—the oral and the textual, the communal and the individual. Through her, Shekhar symbolically reclaims the Santhal woman's capacity to think, reason, and redefine herself.

Judith Butler's theory of gender performativity deepens this reading. Gender, as Butler states, is a performative act constantly repeated and redefined through practice (Butler 34). Santhal women perform domesticity, motherhood, and ritual roles, yet within these performances, they exercise control. Rupali's outspokenness and Putki's unapologetic lifestyle are not violations of gender but re-creations of it. Their defiance suggests that identity, like tradition, is flexible and continually negotiated.

Equally significant is Shekhar's representational politics. His narrative rejects the exoticizing tendencies of mainstream Indian English fiction, where tribal communities are often presented as primitive or mystic. Instead, Shekhar uses Santhali idioms, songs, and oral rhythms to narrate from within. As Choudhury notes, his novel "fuses the modern with the traditional" to portray lived Santhal realities authentically. The intermingling of oral texture and English prose functions as cultural translation—it preserves Santhal voices while positioning them within national literature.

Through illness, witchcraft, patriarchy, and survival, Shekhar dismantles the binary of civilized versus primitive. His women are neither victims nor saviors but complex agents of their own stories. Rupi's mysterious ailment, Gurubari's envy, Rupali's education, and Putki's defiance form an evolving portrait of womanhood negotiating faith, power, and modernity.

Ultimately, *The Mysterious Ailment of Rupi Baskey* stands as both a literary and political intervention. It links local tribal realities with global feminist and postcolonial questions about representation, silence, and agency. The novel reimagines the Santhal woman not as an object of pity or folklore but as a conscious subject within history—someone who, even when silenced, speaks through her endurance. By situating their voices within indigenous epistemology, Shekhar gives these women what Spivak calls "a space of enunciation," allowing them to narrate their survival in their own language and rhythm.

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