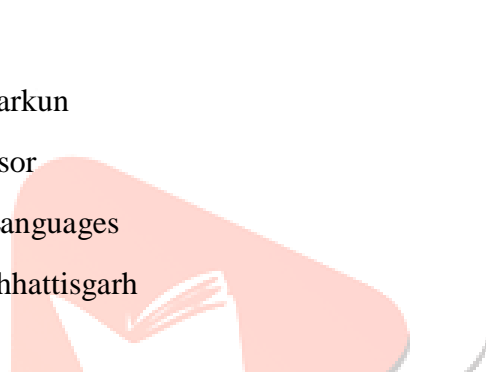
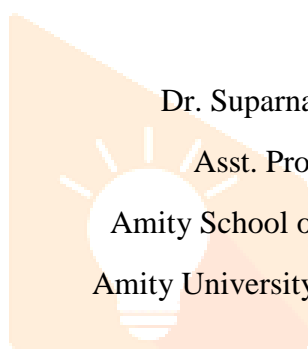
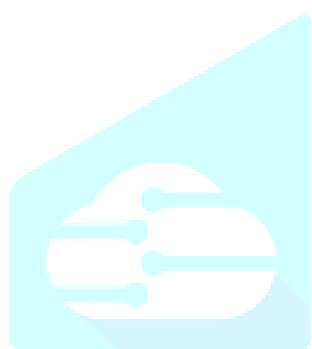




OF MAIDS AND HOUSE KEEPERS TURNED WITCHES IN A MAN'S WORLD: TRAVERSING THE WITCH WORLD OF HANSADA SOWENDRA SHEKHAR'S BASO- JHI



Dr. Suparna Karkun

Asst. Professor

Amity School of Languages

Amity University Chhattisgarh

Abstract: Women contribute at least half of the world's population and play their roles as mothers, daughters, house keepers, cooks, maids and caregivers. A world without them is unimaginable, yet they are also branded as witches in several communities and face violence and untold suffering because of baseless accusations with ulterior motives mostly within the family. While several researchers have validated the fact that witches are an all women forte and it is only women who are old, financially weak or have a dark skin that are made scapegoats, this paper brings to the forefront the misery of displacement that the accused woman has to face. In particular the paper stresses on the predicament of Baso-jhi the protagonist of Hansada Sowendra Shekhar's story by the same name. The fact that she is double displaced and is wrongly accused of witchcraft causing sickness or death in the village is largely because of the fact that she is old and dark the physical attributes that are largely responsible for being called witches. The paper explores the complexities of the Santhal practice of witch hunting as depicted by Hansada Sowendra Shekhar in the story *Baso-jhi* from the story collection "*The Adivasi will not Dance*".

Index Terms: Santhal, Displacement, Witchcraft, Scapegoat,

1. INTRODUCTON:

Displacement seldom makes people feel connected to the new place and is rarely a voluntary process. It causes severe psychological trauma and when displacement is forced it doubles up the feeling of alienation and helplessness. The oppressed victim is left in a daze as to how his cultural and social roots can get an anchor. Dislocation can severely affect an individual's sense of dignity and authenticity. Alienation from one's home, space and place forcibly or through suggestive measures can severely hamper the victim's self-image and result in loss of harmony with one's surroundings. (Bill Ashcroft, 1990) states that a primary concern of post-colonial literature is the fact that displacement may lead to loss of identity leading to alienation of an individual.

A valid and active sense of self may have been eroded by dislocation, resulting from migration, the experience of enslavement, transportation, or 'voluntary' removal for indentured labour. (Ashcroft et al.2002. pg 9)

Several writers have manifested the pain of displacement in a majority of ways and countless number of characters have depicted their pain of been marginalised and oppressed. Several concepts form a part of the post-colonial theory that includes the terms of otherness, hybridity and double alienation. The "otherness" and the "exoticness" of women accused as witches has been a matter of speculation, controversy and intrigue since times immemorial. Hansada Sowendra Shekhar's portrayal of the elderly protagonist's plight after witch accusations by her close ones is the focus of my paper. The objective is primarily to analyse the reasons for witch accusations in the tribal society and the theme of displacement and the anguish of the displaced in Shekhar's short story "Baso Jhi". The short story "Baso Jhi" is a poignant description of a woman uprooted from her place in the evening of her life. He describes

the uncertainties, trauma and wretchedness faced by Baso Jhi for no fault of her own. At the same time she is presented as a character who is resilient as well as full of self-respect even when she is in the midst of adversity. Shekhar's writing in simple and unembellished words describe the daily turmoil of tribal life and his familiarity with their customs and traditions convey to the reader his minute observations and his skill at depicting characters that are life like. His story brings to the forefront the ignorant and superstitious lives of the Santhals who can go to any extent once they are in midst of adversity that can channelise their energies towards a supernatural cause. Their firm belief in that fact that witches do exist, is strengthened as they encounter unexplained health issues or financial loss. Shekhar's story is a realistic portrayal of the practise of witch hunting that is not only prevalent in most of the tribal societies in India but also amongst the indigenous tribes of Africa, Australia and other Caribbean countries. Several papers on witch hunting and witch craft exist that have established the reasons for an innocent woman being branded a witch as being a part of the conspiracy by very close members of the family or by people with the ulterior motive of usurping shared family property. The present study using such studies as groundwork would analyse the character of Baso jhi and Shekhar's portrayal of her realistic experience leading to alienation and estrangement from all human association.

2.LITERATURE REVIEW

Shekhar is known for his themes of ill treatment, exploitation and trauma in his stories that speak volumes about his minute observation and detailed characterisation. His works highlight the plight of the Santhals and their abject poverty, marginalisation and alienation in his collection of stories titled "*The Adivasi will not Dance*". Several researchers (Krishna, 2020) have delved into his work to analyse several perspectives that arise out his thought provoking fiction.

The characters and settings of the stories are mostly from the community of Santhal people of Jharkhand, particularly in relation to Coal mining in India. Prominent themes include the condition of women in a patriarchal society, poverty, middle-class Santhal life, the situation of Adivasi people, organized crime, tensions between traditionalism and modernity, the social damage caused by mining and sex-work. (Manmohan Krishna, Dr, Anupam Kumar, 2020, n.pg)

Most of the researches done on Shekhar focus on his portrayal of the adivasis their acculturation. (Inna Malissa bte Che Jamal, 2014) describe displacement as being forced to move from the comfort of one's home to a surrounding that is strange and alien land. The quest for an identity is a nagging pain that binds all migrants. As (Chakraborty, 2017) describes the irony and pain that Shekhar focuses on in his short story deprivation and eroding of cultural identity of all adivasis as a cause for concern:

"The entire narrative thus becomes an account of pervasive immiseration brought about by material deprivation, on the one hand, and eroding cultural identity, on the other"(pg 7)

(Chakraborty A., 2019) exploration of Shekhar's novel *The Mysterious Ailment of Rupri Baskey (2014)* brings before us the nuanced depiction of the ingenuity of the tribal community in India.

In addition, as witchcraft predominates the narrative, it can also be argued that through the depiction of witches, Hansda critiques the social practice of witch-hunting and of social stereotypes, divisions and hierarchies that exist among Santhals.(pg 8)

3. DISPLACEMENT THEORY

This paper employs displacement theory to highlight the plight of innocent Baso Jhi and her predicament of having to live amongst people whom she barely knows leaving the comfort and security of the home that she built with a lot of hard work and care. (R.Kalyasundaram, 2020) opine that an uprooted individual takes a long time to settle down at another spot and Baso Jhi underwent the torturous process not once but twice. How Shekhar describes the predicament of Baso jhi and how he portrays her inner strength despite being displaced twice is the crux of this paper.

4. WITCHES ARE AN ALL WOMEN FORTE

Soma Chaudhari's research based on data collected after meeting and interacting with women who have been branded witches and also with those who have accused them of practising witch craft on the practise of witch delineates that as women are considered weak physically, emotionally and more often than not financially, they are easy targets by societies as witches.

The violence-against women approach to understanding witch hunts proposes that men, through violence, exert their power and authority to control women's bodies and behaviour (Soma Chaudhuri 2013 pg.1214)

She also reiterates that property issues and deliberate persecution of widows by branding them as witches have been established during the course of research on how women become scapegoats to witch hunting. Her research takes a critical approach in analysing how scapegoats are selected and what role men and other factors play in witch hunting. A close scrutiny of witch accusations brings to limelight the fact that witch accusations may be prompted by personal vengeance to disputes over property issues. Although men play a vital role in such accusations, they are joined by women because of the belief that a virtuous woman is one who abides by the wishes of her husband and also because of lack of economic stability. The entire tribal society believes in the fact that witches can cause severe diseases and even death and unless the witch is killed or punished, the entire village would continue to suffer.

The women who would be branded witches is always pre-decided and it is always women who fall easy prey to witch accusations.

Physical features, like age (old women), a hunch back, or hair or skin color were used to identify witches. Lata, 29 years old, said, "Who knows why they accused mother of witchcraft. Maybe . . . because she had a hunchback." Bila, a 33-year-old female, said, "I do not understand why this happened . . . they said my mother's hair was as white as a witch's. Does having white hair make one a witch? She was a good woman." For Dulari, her trauma started after her neighbor was told by the janguru that a "dark woman" caused his wife to be sick. Dulari's skin color was the cause behind Dulari's accusation. Ramani, the 60-year-old woman who was ostracized by the entire village on suspicion of witchcraft and was rescued by Shamita, tried to explain why she was accused: "I was kicked by the entire village. They told me that I had a buri nazar. My dark skin tone was a problem, too." (Soma Chaudhari, 2013p.1128)

The women in communities where they do not have the right to even be heard bear the brunt of such baseless accusations leading them to be extremely vulnerable in the male dominated patriarchy. This is corroborated by (SS, 2006) during the course of his research on witchcraft in the Chota Nagpur region.

In the case of Santhals, witches were exclusively women." Also, while both men and women could be potential witches, more often than not, the language of the construction of witches kept the female dominant. Thus the words colloquially used to describe witches, more often than not, were dain or churail (female) rather than bishaha (male). In fact, the Santhal theory of the origin of witchcraft ascribes the 'practice' to prevalent gender tensions. (S.Sinha,p.129)

He argues that wives or family members of influential people are rarely accused of witchcraft, it is only the destitute, old, poor and helpless women who are accused or those whose family members have entered into a controversy in the village. His research too brings out the fact that women are selected as witches based on their physical attributes.

Generally old women with queer penetrating looks and ugly shapes (apparently provoking fear into the minds of the people) were taken to be witches." Old women were easy to fit in the 'old hag' image of witches. But childless widows or single or unprotected women were primary victims of witch accusations. In some cases, however, the victims had been young and comely girls 'quite unlike the ancient hag of western fancy'(S.Sinha p.138)

Once a woman is accused of witchcraft such is the social pressure that the poor woman is left with no choice but to accept her guilt, upon which she is beaten, paraded naked, tied up for days on end and inflicted with severe mental and physical torture. He details the consequences of witch craft that at times may affect the entire village.

Because of witchcraft, people in the village become enemies, doors of relatives is shut, father and sons quarrel, brothers are separated, husband and wife are divorced and in the country people kill each other"(S.Sinha,p.128)

A careful reading of Hansada Sowendra Shekhar's short story baso-jhi brings before us the predicament of a woman accused as a witch and her compulsion to move from one place to another, dispossessed, alien and rendered a wanderer just to satisfy the fanciful whim of the villagers. Shekhar's depiction of Baso-jhi's transformation from a popular, fun loving and lively Basanti to the wanderer Baso -jhi who tries to escape the blame of being the evil one is to be studied minutely to understand the progression of the character. A detailed textual analysis unfolds the pain of Baso-jhi as she withdraws herself and transforms from the quintessential house help and companion to a dreaded witch.

5 TEXTUAL ANALYSIS

Shekhar's story describes Baso-jhi as a confident, friendly and agile elderly woman who is brought to Sarjomdih by Soren Babu who is a banker. He is the one who had brought Baso-jhi to Sarjomdih. Baso-jhi very quickly adjusts to the household of Soren Babu trying to be of help to his wife Pushpa.

In Baso-jhi, Pushpa found a baby-sitter, a house-keeper, a laundry woman, a vegetable-chopper, a masala-grinder, a fish-scaler, a back-scrubber, a scalp-masseuse, a confidante and a companion. Soren Babu, who didn't have immediate family, found a mother figure. (Shekhar, 2015, pg. 117)

Shekhar portrays Basanti as a woman who has ample knowledge of the Santhal way of life. She would inspire the young children of Sarjomdih with stories of Santhal heroes and their chivalrous adventure. She is physically strong for her age and adept at all household tasks. She is also quite popular among the young and old alike. She is befriended by old Dashrath Murmu who is a widower and is worried about the future of his well-educated daughter Bijoya. Bijoya is a gold medallist in history and is also an expert cook, cleaner, care-giver for the elderly and can manage even to split firewood. Yet her marriage cannot be solemnised because she has the "wrong sort of complexion". Basanti is dazed to hear that Bijoya is accused of sorcery and is held responsible for her mother's death, the disability of her brother and the failure of her father's crops. Basanti can connect to Bijoya's pain and in vain would she try to convince her father that a daughter as virtuous as Bijoya is, does not need any support of a man.

Amidst the ongoing peaceful days Basanti is suddenly aware of suspicious eyes when her next door neighbour Maino's four year old grandson falls sick and ultimately dies. She finds herself amidst accusing secretive talks and finds herself secluded from the daily activities of Soren Babu's house. She overhears whispers and discreet insinuations debarring her from being a member of the family, an alien wretched soul, a shadow of her confident self as she discovers

This was the third death in this village in two years; that is, after Basanti's arrival. Two old men, so old that continued life would've been a miracle, were the first ones to go. But Maino's grandson had still been a child. (p.121)

She is dissuaded from doing the household work and Pushpa pesters Soren Babu no end out of fear that the witch might harm her children. Unable to cope up with his wife's nagging Souren Babu too accepts, unwillingly though, that Basanti was a *dahni*. The word has been echoed so much in Basanti's ears that she gets to believe that she indeed is a witch.

Baso-jhi knew. She was a dahni- a witch. She'd killed her own grandson and, for that, her sons had disowned her. How could she expect strangers to accept her? She truly was a witch. (pg. 122)

In a flashback technique Shekhar brings before our eyes the entire struggle of Basanti from the times that she as the unschooled, illiterate bride set foot in her husband's village. She leads a contented life till her husband expires leaving her young to fend for herself and her two young sons. She faces lots of trials and tribulations that come in the form of conspiracies by her late husband's relatives and loses a lot of her farmland. Left with a small patch of land, she grows vegetables and sells them in the market. She also does odd jobs for survival.

...She survived everything –hunger, poverty, scheming relatives and salacious leers. The gritty Santhal widow proved herself a capable single mother, and nurtured her fatherless sons unaided, not once allowing them to feel deprived or desperate. (pg. 125)

After her sons grow up and have families Basanti realises she is not wanted anymore, so she builds herself a small hut on her farmland and starts living alone. When her grandchild dies of diarrhoea even after Basanti's care, within no time her daughters-in-law accuse her of witchcraft. Even her sons sided with their wives asked her if she sacrificed children to please her evil God. Basanti is shattered when she realises her own flesh and blood believe that she is a witch. Her sons ransack her home and throw out all her belongings. Not satisfied, her younger son pulls her by the hair and throwing her to the ground, starts kicking her in the abdomen.

...her own sons!-calling her a witch? (pg.127)

People gather around but as mere spectators. Tolerating unbearable pain Basanti moves out and is then discovered by Souren Babu to be displaced again from Sarjomdih. This time Basanti knows she has to leave before the villagers gather and she is humiliated again. Basanti is displaced from her cosy confines of a corner in Souren Babu's house that she set up as her home with few, scanty belongings.

6. CONCLUSION

The accusations on women as witches are primarily based on gossip, rumours and ulterior motives to usurp land or property owned by defenceless widows or old frail defenceless women. All this is brought about in Baso-jhi's character painting by Hansada Sowendra Shekhar. This study traces the pain of an alienated woman, her displacement by her own children and her social ostracism. Shekhar addresses this burning issue of Witchcraft among the Santhals and brings before the readers the need to educate and enlighten the masses regarding this violent and discriminatory practice of Witch hunting. The research has also established the fact that violence against women is a heinous occurrence that needs to be addressed.

REFERENCES:

- Bill Ashcroft, G. G. (1990). *The Empire Writes Back*. London and New York: Routledge.
- Chakraborty, A. (2017). Examining Subalterneity in Hansa Sowendra Shekhar's 'The Adivasi Will Not Dance'. *Postcolonial Text*, Vol 2 No 1.
- Chakraborty, A. (2019). *Rupkatha Journal of Interdisciplinary studies in Humanities*, 1-9.
- Inna Malissa bte Che Jamal, H. K. (2014). A Study of Displacement in Jean Rhys' Novel *Wide Sargasso Sea*. *Advances in Language and Literary Studies*, n.pg.
- Krishna, M. (2020). The Realistic Picture Of the Tribals in The Adivasi Will Not Dance. *Journal of Emerging Technologies and Innovative Research*, 1685-1688.
- R.Kalyasundaram, D. M. (2020). Breaking the Barriers: Displacement to Self-realisation in Bharati Mukherjee's *The Tiger's Daughter*. *European Journal of Molecular and Clinical Medicine*, 4965-4969.
- SS, S. (2006). Adivasis, Gender and the Evil Eye: The Construction(s) of Witches in Colonial Chota Nagpur. *Indian Historical review*, 127-149.