



## Female Tribal Characters in The Adivasi Will Not Dance – Hansda Sowvendra Shekhar

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### Abstract

Hansda Sowvendra Shekhar, the 2015 *Sahitya Akademi Yuva Puraskar* winner, and the nominee of *The Hindu Prize*, *The Crossword Book Award* and *The International Dublin Literary Award* suffered a ban for *The Adivasi Will Not Dance* by Jharkhand Government on the grounds that it is offensive to the dignity of Santhal women. It is also blamed to be pornographic in nature. The book has a large variety of Santhal and non-Santhal female characters spread across the socio-economic spectrum. Most of the female characters be it Baso-jhi, Sona and others featured are defiant and daring. They are weighed down by the burdens of injustice, illiteracy, unemployment, etc. All the female characters mentioned below faced abuse, injustice and exploitation by the so called sophisticated society. This paper presents before the literature readers a review kind of investigation of the tribal female characters depicted in the short stories '*The Adivasi Will Not Dance*' of Hansda Sowvendra Shekhar.

**Keywords:** Tribals, Baso-jhi, Sona, Sulochona, Mathabhangi, Hansda Sowvendra Shekhar.

### Baso-jhi

Basanti aka Baso-jhi, the female protagonist, is tall and dusky woman of Sarjomdih who reminds us of *Martha* of *Walter de la Mare* in the art of storytelling. While telling stories to the young, she takes them on a journey to realms of magic and fantasy. Since her arrival in Sarjomdih, Baso-jhi became a favorite with almost everyone, whether young or old, and she became an integral part of the day-to-day life of the village. To run a family, she works in Pushpa's house.

'In Baso-jhi, Pushpa found a baby-sitter, a house-keeper, a laundrywoman, a vegetable-chopper, a *masala-grinder*, a fish-scaler, a back-scrubber, a scalp-masseuse, a confidante and a companion.' 1

Even in 21<sup>st</sup> century, it is assumed that witchcraft and black magic is prevalent in tribal societies. And Sarjomdih is not an exception one. When there is the third death in the village in two years; after Baso-jhi's arrival, all of a sudden, Baso-jhi's presence began to matter. Though the boy's death was unnatural, it is claimed, and Pushpa began asking the same, hard questions she had asked two years earlier to Soren-babu and he found himself unable to answer:

'Who is this Baso-jhi? Where has she come from? 2

Soren-babu screams at Pushpa, 'So what do I do then? Tell her that she is a *dahni*, grab her by her hair and throw her out of the house?

The rumors hurt Baso-jhi. Baso-jhi knew. She was a *dahni*- a witch. While she was staying with her sons, one of her grandsons died leaving behind a scar on Baso-jhi. A unbearable blame that she'd kill her own grandson and, for that, her sons had disowned her. How could she expect strangers to accept her? She truly was a witch.

Kindness, understanding, the ability to run their household smoothly, respect for their mother-in-law – these things made no sense to Baso-jhi's daughter-in-laws. Not only her heart but her soul is hurt when her offspring inquire indignantly:

"Tell us what you are up to inside your hut? Her sons asked. 'Which evil gods do you worship, and how many children do you need for your sacrifice?' 3

The sons kept hurling abuses and kicks. The older son, meanwhile, prepared to demolish his mother's fragile dwelling. One hard blow of the hatchet and the bamboo door came off. Another blow and the wooden panels of the make-shift kitchen were gone. Another blow and the clay *chulha* crumbled.

The plight of Baso-jhi is never ending. She has been the sufferer. She has gathered *tendu* and *sal* leaves, *mahua* blossoms and bamboo shoots, for which she got a fair price in the market. At times she worked at building and road construction sites and also found work at a rice-mill in town.

Baso-jhi is a strong tribal woman. Survival has always the first thing on Baso-jhi's mind and 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.

A lifetime of struggle and toil had hardened not only her limbs but also her soul. She soon realized that her sons and their wives didn't want her around, so she built herself a one-room hut on the same small patch of land where she used to grow vegetables. That was where she cooked, slept and lived.

Baso-jhi's pain is doubled when Pushpa has unspoken suspicious eyes upon her. She is totally broken. It is enough for her now. She leaves the house of Soren-Babu and Pushpa without intimating them. She left everything behind.

'The folding-cot was set upright. One it were neatly arranged the clothes and other articles – a comb, oil, sal twigs for cleaning teeth, soap – that Baso-jhi had received from the Soren family. Her rubber chappals were neatly arranged under the cot but Baso-jhi herself, and her bundle, was gone.' 4

### **Merely A Whore**

Every prostitute in the proximity of Lakkhipur craved to be Sona, the brightest star of Jharna-di's house. Sona was a dream; everyone else was merely a whore. She would unlock the very gates of a palace of pleasures and invite her customers within as honoured guests. Sona had learnt the art of love making and honed to perfection – art of making man happy, the art of satisfying a customer.

While there was always competition at Jharna-di's house – fresh meat always attracts more flies – the true connoisseurs, the eternal regulars, the customers who mattered, would ask for Sona, the phantom of delight.

Illiteracy, poverty and lack of employment led to flesh trade. All dancers turned to prostitution. We come to know that Jharna-di gives shelter to them, fed them, and waited for them to die. Pain surfaces when Jharna-di utters:

'Even we will end up like this. All of us will. This life will not let us escape. All we can ensure is that we do not end up living like this.' 5

It would not be an exaggeration to say that the drought in Lakkhipur led farmers deserting their fields and moved away to towns. The zamindars sold their properties to mining firms and shifted to apartment blocks and duplexes in cities. Thus, colony of tribals became infamous by transforming into a red-light area. The musicians who once accompanied the dancers during their performances became their pimps. Flesh trade crept up.

Jharna became Jharna-di. Once an attractive dancer, turned into a rough-talking brothel madam who wielded enormous clout. The DSP, the *bada-babu* at the Thana, the managers of the mines, the union leaders, the *thikedaar* as well as the big fish of the shadowy world of coal-mining were all her patrons.

'Sona had been brought to Jharna-di by a supplier along with other girls; some from Bengal and Bihar, two from Nepal and three from Bangladesh. Sona was one of the light-complexioned ones among them. Jharna saw something in her.' 6

Jharna-di was sympathetic but stern towards Sona. Her concern about Sona is felt when she murmurs:

'Pay attention to your work. Life teaches us lessons. Learn those lessons and move on.' 7

Women in flesh trade are never accepted in civilized society. Sona was very popular, still in demand. But who knew what was to come? Sona, blinded by her infatuation for Nirmal, could not see what was going on behind her back, what was being said about her. But Jharna, whose own sufferings had made her shrewd, could clearly see that her star girl had taken the wrong road – a road that would only lead to disappointment and heartbreak. Jharna could only drop guarded hints. Sona heard, exhaled bitterly, and unheard what Jharna had said.

'We do not have wing, girl. We cannot even think of growing them.' 8

As there were no works even for the uneducated tribal girls who didn't possess any technical skills, sex business was the easiest one for living. Prostitution always prospers on the ground of illiteracy and unemployment. Once during her conversation with Nirmal she utters pensively:

'I only worry about work? Tell me. What else will I do if I don't do this? Who will feed me and clothe me?'

Nirmal convinces her to be with her forever. Such moments made Sona melt. These were the times when worries of work and money evaporated completely and she began dreaming of spending her life with Nirmal.

Sona loves Nirmal and dreams of being his life-long partner rather than a one night-stand. She craves for a *kiss* on her lips instead of a lot of kisses on other parts of bodies which Nirmal puts during their intimate moments. To Sona a *kiss on lips* denotes true love rather than a physical attraction. But Nirmal is reluctant to fulfill her demand. Being angry at her continuous demands for a *kiss*, he scolds her:

'Kiss? I don't kiss a *rendi* on the lips. You're not happy with what I am doing with you? Just see what else I can do to you!' 9

Sona is broken into pieces, kept staring at the wall, motionless, lifeless. She felt like crying, but the last time she had cried was years ago. Now she understood: a whore will always be a whore!

### Eating With The Enemy

The story begins with Sulochona Behera, the domestic help of the narrator, loves talking non-stop about her unhappy childhood and the hardships she had to suffer. She has a pathetic childhood. Sulochona grew up to be a lovely girl – healthy and fair-skinned. But the abuse changed her from within, and hardened her.

Mohini the mistress of Dinanath sells liquor later on ended up selling her body. After the birth of Mathabhangi, Sulochona was the object of less interest for her husband Dinanath. In this connection, Mohini grabbed the opportunity. So, instead of being stuck in a situation where she would have to belong to many men, she felt it was better to live in the house of a man who had a regular job. It didn't matter that he was already married, that his wife was still alive, and that they had four children.

Sulochona, though bit jealous of Mohini, still is kind towards to her. While working in the narrator's house, she talks about her with the house lady.

'Didi, you know, Mohini brought *ingreji* liquor and *chakhna* from her mother's house. Such pork! We all ate and drank, di. Me, Mathabhangi's father and Mohini. Mohini is such a good woman!' 10

Tribals love and fear God. They rely upon fate. To them, whatever goes is the only desire of God and no one could alter that. In her conversation with the house lady, Sulochona says softly:

'Whatever is in her fate, I just want her to see the world, learn new things. Whatever *bhogobaan* has planned for her, who can deny that?' 11

Mathabhangi, the daughter of Sulochona is sent to Adityapur with her step-mother Mohini. Mohini, now a widow, lures a *Babu* with her physical complexion. Mathabhangi would be a happy girl now was the thought of her mother Sulochona. But, for *Babu* she was a new catch, a grooming tribal beauty, virgin, enticing with her blooming body. When, *Babu* gifts a *ghagri-chunri* and insists her to wear the same in his presence, Mathabhangi is alarmed. Her happiness turns into vapors. It's always said that *women have sixth sense!*

Being literary readers, we feel helpless and angry with the behavior of the so called sophisticated person like *Babu*. A fawn being enticed by a lion! He is ready to tear her off and enjoy the nectar of chastity. His kisses make her so terrified, motionless. She couldn't resist, she couldn't move even a limb. Her eyes welled up with tears of fear and helplessness as well as ours. The evil intention of *Babu* is revealed.

'Why am I keeping you in this house? Why am I feeding you, buying you things? And why did your mother send you here in the first place? To eat free food?' 12

In conclusion, it can be said that all the female protagonists of Hansda Sowvendra Shekhar are finally proved to be a puppet in the hands of time. They are bold, beautiful and soulful but illiteracy and unemployment always proved to be bane form them. Being a person of flesh and blood, they feed themselves to be alive. Selling their bodies to the flesh seekers is the easiest way for their survival.

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