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## **Rising above (S) exploitation: The voice of Santhal women as represented by Sowvendra Shekhar Hansda**

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**Abstract**---Empowering the women in literary context has always taken the academia on storm. The latent desire of authors and scholars to see an egalitarian world has been channelised in contextualising the female self-sureness in their authors characterisation. However, women characters of mainstream society have gained acclaimed acknowledgement way before than the ones belonging to the marginal communities. The belief that Tribal women are less participative and contributively less active in tribal *écriture* has reigned the scholastic views. Such perception has changed its course in post-colonial era and the tribal women have found their voice in their characterisation. The present article challenges the resigned perceivability of the Santhal women and maps on how they have been empowered by the sole Santhal writer writing in English, Hansda Sowvendra Shekhar. He aces up to bring them to the frontier. Wide array of women characters from various socio-economic framework, within the Santhal community, form the content of his discussion. The concerned Santhal community has never seen such textual presentation of their women in broader platform and the Anglophone contemporary writer, Hansda, is instrumental in his competence of writing his texts in English to reach out to the vast range of audience

**Keywords**---characterisation, *écriture*, santhal women, texts, tribal community.

## Introduction

“Tribal have emerged as an area of critical concern in contemporary literary tradition of subaltern studies. In Indian literary tradition, the tribal have not been given adequate space. Every marginalized community like women and Dalits started their movement in full swing and represented themselves in modern Indian literary tradition. But the tribal are yet to create a distinct space for themselves. It is due to their lack of power to assert due to their poverty and exploitation by the dominant class. It is slowly being acknowledged” (Gond). It is through the Tribal writers that the same has been recognised. Writers like Mahashweta Devi and Gopinath Mohanty, have presented the tribes in a different shade, although themselves being from non-tribal background. Both writers have made different and seminal contribution in evolution of tribal literature and establishing their distinct cultural identity by rejecting the conventional colonial identity such as primitive, uncivilised, animal like, animism, barber and so on. They have attempted to place tribal into the national history. Mohanty has always highlighted the issues like as bonded slavery, feudalism, socio-political exclusion, economic exploitation, land displacement, sexual harassment of tribal women, and merciless killing of the tribal people. And Devi has given voice to the mute tribals to raise voice against the exploitation and to participate in political and social structure. Tribal society is still patriarchal society and gender-based violence is quite common. One of the common elements of tribal society that the scholars have often written about is alienation. “Verier Elwin presented a policy of “isolation” of the tribals from the non-tribal society” (Mullick and Chatterjee, 1997). There is non-existent harmonious relationship between the tribes and mainstream society and such is the reason behind the true sinking image of tribal communities. Various authors have tried to interrogate the complexity of the racial, colonial, post-colonial forces, class and gender issues affecting the tribal society through their study. However, tribal writers like Narayan, Hansda, Mohanty have given a new dimension to the centre’s perspective of the marginals. The image of the women too is changing with the passage of time. The female protagonists, portrayed by the novelists Chitra Banerjee Devakurani and Sashi Deshpande, are away from the traditional portrayals of the self-sacrificing, enduring, meek and quiet woman. They are the modern portrayals of self-assured, assertive, educated, protesting and ambitious ones; making society aware of their needs and proving their identities. These protagonists, struggle to find solace, assimilating the two worlds i.e., traditional and modern.

The research paper analyses the texts, *The Mysterious Ailment of Rupi Baski*, a novel and *Adivasi will Not Dance*, a short story collection, authored by Sowvendra Shekhar Hansda which are set on a specific tribe of eastern India, known as Santhal Tribe. The Santal is the third largest among tribes in India, after Gond and Bhil, numbering about 4 million and is the most discussed tribes in India. They are mostly clustered in the states of Bihar, Jharkhand, West Bengal and Orissa. Their settlement dates back to centuries ago and they have undergone a rebellion against the British government and Zamindars to resist against the land reforms brought about to displace them. However, they have lost, they have made an impact in the history of India. Over the years they have survived with their cultural strength and indomitable mettle which do not allow them to be counted, now, as the endangered tribes in the country. They are the only Indian tribe who

have claimed their linguistic existence and have fought against all odds to hold on to their ethnicity. Their literary development has transformed from the oral narratives to creative writings.

The fictions of concern, presents the socio-cultural position of the Santhals in the society. Hansda Sowvendra Shekhar is the sole Santhal tribal writer who has been writing in English. Badal Hembram, Kherwal Soren, Jamadar Kisku, Nirmala Putul, Regina Marandi, Arjun Chandra Hembrom, Gangadhar Hansda are some of the other prominent Santali writers. It is often presumed that Tribal Literature comprise of folklore and mythical aspects and with this constructed hypothesis it became a requirement for the tribal literature to be produced in written form otherwise their culture was considered very low as it could not contribute to the main society owing to its presumed mythical nature. Sowvendra is widely acclaimed first Santhali writer who has gained recognition for his writing his works in English. Hansda says, "I think storytelling is often an assertion of one's identity. This assertion can either be in-your-face or subtle, but in whichever way it is done, this assertion is a good thing" (Meghani, 2019). He has the freedom to express, just like any other citizen of the country. Sowvendra's writings, narrating stories that only he can tell, reflect the real issues faced by the Santhals in Jharkhand. His stories are effortless and real, with a tinge of fictional touch attached to them. There is a sense of belonging in them. He says in an interview that: "Writing-wise, I don't see myself as someone different. I have my origin in my mind, the place where I come from, the place where I belong. I am also aware that I might be seen as different. But with my job, my writing, and hundreds of other things that I have to do, I try to not think much about how I am being perceived by others, what image of myself I am portraying, or what others are thinking of me. If I am seen as "a writer writing on ethnic minority issues", fine. If I am seen as just another writer, that is fine as well. I am also okay with writers from other communities writing about my "ethnic minority" community, as long as their writing is true, their observations are right, they have put in a remarkable amount of work in their research and writing, and they are not patronising towards my community. Lazy writing about a community, even if it is by an author from that community, is not a done thing" (Sarma, n.d.). Santhal women have always been the easy target for sexual exploitation by the predators of the mainstream society. The isolated self-voices have gone submerged without claiming any justice. "Faced with a negative impact on schooling and health care, poor living and working conditions, and constant fear of sexual abuse, the entry into the labour market of Santhal women in particular is nothing but a survival strategy since staying at home could mean starvation" (Rao and Kumar, 1997). However, their economic position remains under paid than their male counterpart for the service rendered because they are believed to have done less physical hard work than Santhal men. The scholars Rao and Rana writes an incident in their article, "Bitia retorted to the employer's suggestions to take some water to him at one corner of the plot and so when work was completed in the evening, he scolded her for not working well and paid her less than what was agreed upon as wage. As it is, a woman's wage at Rs25 per day is less than that of a man of Rs30 per day. Apart from her daily provisions Bitia had wanted to buy something special for her children now this hope was dashed to ground" (Rao and Kumar 1997). In the short story "November is the Month of Migration", the policeman says, "You Santhal women are made for this only. You are good" (Shekar, 2017) after the

sexual work was consummated between him and Talamai Tudu, the migrant labourer. The sexual encounter, marked by a sense of vulnerability and precarity, specifically re-enacts the historic encounter between the exploiter and the exploited (Roy, 2020). The Santhal women substantially stand distinctively different from the Dalit women. Where as the latter have gained recognition by voicing their state of affairs, the former is yet to resist the belligerence done towards them. In textual discourse too, the authors have always presented them as subjugated and in distress. Hence the Santhal women were always miserable, less fortunate and submissive. Their plight of existence and the ignorance or identity have found the projections in author's works. The deprivation and degradation of these women have aroused a sense of pity to the readers who mainly contribute from mainstream society. The readers have so far sympathised and extended compassion on their misery. However, no women would require so for their condition. They require the dynamicity of their characterization. They aim to be projected as fighters and not survivors. Sowendra Shekhar Hansda, the first of its kind to take up the cudgels against the convention of the community, presents the Santhal women as dynamic, educated, working and liberated. His women characters belong to array of socio-economic background but his empowerment of them is not subjected by their qualification or profession. They are economically deprived and sometimes ignorant of knowledge of education yet upright and self-sure.

### **Research Objectives**

There are two underlying objectives in the research paper. The first one is that the social warriors have always presented Santhal women as the overmastered subjects, however the present paper denies to accept it as the general concept. There are exceptions and this is what Hansda presents through his works. The research paper highlights on them. The second objective is that these women are empowered in themselves in their own way and is not subjected to any society led rules that governs women to be empowered.

### **Literature Review**

It is true that tribal women were submissive and reticent. It is this predicament that has been an interest to the authors like Mahasweta Devi and "paradoxically, gender also acts as an enabling factor, instrumental in resistance and self-assertion of which Mahasweta's protagonists often show themselves capable." (Chakravarty, 2012) Though they were less participative but there were exceptions, as mentioned "were there any tribal women who gave information about their situation? The answer most likely would be negative with some exceptions here and there. Most readings were primarily written with the help of male members of the tribes" (Vinita, 2016). It is further said that though "male domination is stronger among the Santhals who are much more settled in agriculture than among the Munda or Ho...But, for all these tribes, the right of a women to her earnings still holds" (D.N., 1988). A very smaller number of Santhal women who has economic independence, has complete right on their earnings. In societal scenario, Santhal women are not dependent on their male counterparts to build connections and networks, "Women particularly try to keep up social and kin networks and support structures, that could help them in time of crises or at

least be sympathetic to their problems” (Rao and Rana, 1997). The Adivasi women activist Ruby Hembrom shares her plight and says, “School wasn’t a happy place for Ruby Hembrom. There was no one who looked like me. Being Adivasi means your features, your face, they tell your story.” Her classmates would ask her if she polished her face when she polished her shoes. When she said she was an Adivasi from Jharkhand, she was asked if she ate humans or lived on trees.” (Shah, 2019). Such stigmatisation has envisaged the representational presentation by the activists to ameliorate the deracinated condition of the Santhals. This is to draw the attention that so far, such suppression and misery have come to the fore but never the strength of the Santhal women. Academicians, scholars and activists have always craved for the identity and rights of them. However, the historical facts portray the mettle and valour of Santhal men as presented in Santhal Insurrection 1854-55 but the women have never been given the place. There are voices like Santhal Adivasi women activists Dayamani Barla and Jamuna Tudu who have protested against displacement and fought for their community but have never gained popularity. Dayamani Barla worked against the collective oppression of her community. “This Iron lady of Jharkhand is an anti-displacement activist who is well known for her staunch resistance against corporate looting of Adivasi land in the state.” (Gumpenapalli, 2018). She was put behind bars several times for her resistance. Jamuna Tudu Of Muthurkham village resisted against the destruction of forest in Tribal land. “She gathered other tribal women and formed *Van Suraksha Samithi*, which protected at least 50 hectares of forest from deforestation. The forested area is also said to be a battleground for the Indian state and Naxalites. Her organisation consists of women who patrol the jungle with dogs thrice a day. She is known for her well-organised fight against the mafia, withstanding ferocious assaults from the mafia.” (Gumpenapalli, 2018).

### **Methods and Materials**

Hansda breaks the conventional pity portrayal of his Santhal women and attributes a different dimension to his characterisation. This differs from several other feminist writing in regard that the voicing is not cultivated by a female writer deconstructing the usual suppressive myth but a male of the community who is himself a part of the heterogeneity that works to present the counter as a victim of reductivism. He takes a path not often trodden and being a male writer, he veers away from the obvious atavism and aces himself to present his women characters well secured and resolved. The methodology used is tribal feminism as consolidated after analysing the works of Anil Kumar Mahapatra, Mahasweta Devi and the interviews of Hansda Sowvendra Shekhar. “Anil Kumar Mahapatra who studied the tribal women of Koraput, Odisha concludes that feminism is not something alien to tribal women. It is rather deeply ingrained in the very culture, than being followed out of fear, compassion, enlightenment, education or compulsion. He’d rather call it spontaneous and indigenous”. (Writer, 2021) True to the concern, the women as Hansda has presented in his works are the daily life realistic characters who know to stand for their own rights. The point of concern arises that if such women existed in Santhal community, where comes the discussion of empowering them textually. The answer to that is obvious that they have not been brought to the fore and an objective perception of conventional subjugated portrayal of tribal women has been done by the academicians so far.

“Theories and ideologies are crucial resources for ordering, defining and evaluating political reality and establishing political identities. However, some regard theory as ideas or suppositions in general contrasted with practice. The validity of a theory warrants an empirical study. Hence, for testing the validity of theories and to assess their relevance, empirical researches are encouraged.” (Mohapatra, 2009) Literature is the mirror of the society. The facts and incidences occurring in the surrounding find place in the works of the authors. Sometimes they tend to portray the reality unpainted and undented. The works of marginal writers fall under such categories and rise above the fiction. Hansda’s works too aim to soothe the resistance faculty of the readers. The empirical evidences too support the misery of the Santhals by the recalcitrant subjects. His talent corroborates to Mahashweta Devi, who had the “talent for combining the real and imaginary, the facts of history with the promptings of a visionary imagination. Her creative writing inhabits the borderland between history and fiction, where ‘truth’ is constructed from the mixture of fact and make believe.” (Chakravarty, 2012). In his short story collection *Adivasi will Not Dance*, the author has used some of the real-life incidences and confesses that in an interview, “Shekhar is telling it like it is. This was confirmed in a recent interview for the Telegraph, where he says, “Every story is scoured out of real life”.”(Minj, 2018).

### **Discussion and Analysis**

The present research paper makes a foray into the illustrations of the following points as to how Hansda has glorified his women characters:

#### **Elevated Beyond Sex Object**

Santhal women’s body has always formed a resource of exploitation. They are treated as an object of consummation. The centre deployed predatory agencies pounce to consummate their lust and as perceived by the *dikus*, “These Santhal girls are cheap...just say a few words in Santali ...just say a few words in Santali...buy them some paan...promise them some jalebi...after that they’ll let you to do whatever you want with them” (Hembram and Hansdak, 2013). However, the women characters in Hansda’s works are the representation of vigour and firmness. The female characters like Rupi, Putki, Subhashini, Gita, Talamai Kisku and Panmuni-jhi are unflinching and portray the usual subversion of hegemony. The concerned author is often criticised for his sharp-edged provocative carnal presentation but the paper acclaims him for his refusal to present the stereotypes and writing in a refreshing break from some of the overwrought aesthetics of female body. The novel *Mysterious Ailment of Rupi Baski* opens with the child birth where the protagonist is observed to be giving birth to her first born in a paddy field, “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, 2013) Such presentation seeps the readers in the unaltered soil of origin. The description rises above the incitement of mere physicality of a women’s body and focuses on the phenomenal strength that maternity foregrounds. Rupi epitomises the valour that she

attributes to her greatest feminine aspect - motherhood. Unfavourable socio-economic situations too accept defeat on the way of the highest pleasure of a woman's life, that of becoming a mother. She undergoes labour pain, delivers a healthy child in the midst of paddy farm and gets back to work in field after five days. The novel runs through five generations and the mother-in-law, Putki, of the titular protagonist Rupi is presented as a naïve and free-spirited character who defied every form of chauvinism from counter gender and led an ungoverned life of mirth. This was quite unusual when the society had restrained the women of their basic rights in an undeclared manner. Such kind of enlightenment has paved the way to claim the Santhal women's position and resist against their suppression. The fact that a free-spirited woman could be an easy target of sexual exploitation, especially if she belongs to an outcast, is however true in regard to Santhal women too but the portrayal of Putki maps beyond such (s)exploitation: "With their jobs came money and freedom. They bought more saris and cosmetics; they made trips to various patas, gaayaans and other gatherings, where they downed glass after glass of haandi". (Hansda 2013)

It is to be noted here that the resistance had been voiced from within the community. It is not about the external forces always, sometimes the agencies within the community become spurious. Words were hurled at Della and Putki for being too free-spirited: "Chi! Chi! These girls are a disgrace", the women of Kadamdihi, especially those from the majhi-gushti, would say" (Hansda 201). Hansda presents the existence of both the types. The one who defies the patriarchy and another kind of women who are part of patriarchally governed society. The characters like Della and Putki gets highlighted only to remind that the society in general and community in particular, needed such characters to exhibit the resistance against patriarchy and conventionalism. The artistic worth requires special mention as the story weaves in such a manner that the evolutionary characters are jaded through the communal hegemony and emerge out victorious in winning the hearts of the readers.

### **Dominant Female Protagonists**

Agbasiere says literary texts written by male writers produce stereotypical features that depict female characters as weak and unable to overcome their hardships (Agbasiere, 1999) This presents stereotypical literary texts where female characters do not play any positive roles, but are only able to perpetuate negative images and not explore all aspects of female experiences. Fortunately, Hansda breaks such stereotypical features and in his works the women characters are not perpetually in negative images. They are the dominant protagonists around whom the entire novel or his short stories are weaved. Rather, they alone take the readers on a sojourn to their tribal world and give a women centric perception to delve deep into Santhal woman's life. The readers become less judgemental and they unravel myriad unexplored tales of Santhal women from an insider's perspective. The readers are made to realise that it is possible for the veritable 'other' of the community to take up the responsibility to take them through the alleys of Santhal life through female vision. The Santhal women's dominance in characterisation bring forth some truth that have always remained untouched that they can become highlighted and gain prominence too, no matter if they are socially outcast. The readers learn that Santhal women

should be unapologetic of their existence and give free will to their wishes. In the novel *Mysterious Ailment of Rupi Baski*, the novel has the titular protagonist Rupi Baski who survives against all odds and emerges out as a successful characterisation by the author. The other two dominating characters are females like Putki and Gurubari. While the former carries on her legacy through generations, the latter has shown her potential in her enticing charms. In the short stories like “They eat Meat”, Panmuni-jhi is the protagonist who displays her mettle in an alien land, Vadodara, in disarming the enemies. In “November Is the Month of Migration”, it is Talamai who is the lead character. In “Eating with the Enemy”, Sulochona is a “Harijan of the Ghasi cast” (Hansda, 2017). In “Blue Baby”, Gita the protagonist is insidious in her marriage to Soren as her true interest lies at giving birth to the child of her beau Dilip. The titular protagonist in “Baso-jhi” is an ill-fated woman who deters not from her self-efficacy in spite of several rejections and deprivations. In “Desire, Divination, Death”, the protagonist Subhashini is a single mother who manages raising up her children alone and has a life blend with professional responsibility too. “Merely a Whore” is the tale of a certain Sona in a brothel who strives hard in quest of a better life with her chosen partner.

### **Educationally Sound and Financially Independent**

“A substantially higher proportion of tribal children. Including girls, are engaged in survival tasks, such as collection of firewood and fetching water, tending livestock and so forth, as compared with the average rural child. Economic hardship is a major factor of drop out for the tribal children. Sibling care and other household chores are equally pressing factors for dropout among the girl children.” (Ghosh, 2007) This is definitely the harsh reality of marginal society. However, the data also reveals that Santhal women are comparatively aware of educational benefit and the disparity of education ratio between men and women in Santhal community is less. In a research carried out by some 400 samples of Santhal men and women, it was found that “Both men and women from younger generation are better educated as compared to their older counterpart. The following table shows the distribution of Education among Santhals as between Men and Women:

Table 1  
Distribution of Education among Santhals, by sex (Age group: 18 years – 35 years)

Educational level	Males		Females		Total	
	No.	%	No.	%	No.	%
Illiterate	27	6.8	123	30.8	150	18.8
Literate	6	1.5	13	3.3	19	2.4
Primary (till 5 <sup>th</sup> )	46	11.5	80	20.0	126	15.8
Lower secondary (till 8 <sup>th</sup> )	99	24.8	114	28.5	213	26.6
Secondary (till 10 <sup>th</sup> )	145	36.3	53	13.3	198	24.8
Higher secondary (till 12 <sup>th</sup> )	47	11.8	11	2.8	58	7.3
Graduate	29	7.3	6	1.5	35	4.4
Post graduate	/					
Professional	1	0.3	0	0.0	1	0.1
Total	400	100.0	400	100.0	800	100.0

(Sudipta and Malik, 2008)

As per the data in the table, majority of the Santhal women from this generation have formal education and most of them are qualified up to lower secondary (28.5%), primary (20.0%) or secondary (13.3%). A sizable percentage of men from younger generation are qualified up to secondary (36.3%), followed by lower secondary (24.8%) and higher secondary (11.8%).” (Sudipta and Malik, 2008).

Hansda tries to project the reality through some of his short stories like “Blue Baby” where the protagonist Gita goes to extreme to complete her practical classes of B.Ed. degree. Despite the fact that doctor had advised her for bed rest owing to her complicated pregnancy, she still continued with her classes as she did not want any impediments on her way of completion of her degree. This gives a clear implication of the educational drive that the current generation Santhal women are aware of. Such presentation unmasks the community’s mystic notion that the mainstream society harbored. The illustration further harps on the commitment of Gita’s husband towards her vocation and it was beyond her wildest imagination, “...his ‘ideal’ man persona, her husband’s defiance of his family to take her for her teachers’ training course on his motorcycle, braving risk and censure, was beyond Gita’s wildest imagination” (Hansda, 2017). In another short story “Baso-jhi”, “Bijoya was a Santhal woman ...what set her apart from the other girls of the village was her education: she was a graduate, an honours holder in History, and aspired to become a teacher.” (Hansda, 2017). She was a gold medallist. The significance of the mention of such women in Hansda’s *écriture* is to bring forth that although less in number, as compared to the mainstream society, but Santhal women too are getting enlightened from the darkness of ignorance to the light of knowledge.

### **Modern Women**

As can be summarised the concept of Spivak’s “Can the Subaltern Speak”, ‘essentialism was the target of much feminist criticism because activists recognised that generalizations about “woman” inevitably exclude some women. Spivak’s landmark contribution to this debate was the concept of “strategic essentialism”. Of course, many women are not poor, and poverty has caused other than an individual’s sex, but to battle effectively against the poverty of some women requires the strategic essentialism of highlighting the gendered nature of economic inequality” (In and Spivak, 2010). In contextual reference, the further examination of the women characters in Hansda’s *écriture* undoubtedly reveals that they tend to shed off colonial aura and reverberates with the spirit of modern woman. They are free-spirited, unapologetic, and historically unconventional. They unravel their strategic radical potential that they lead a life that is their own, ungoverned by the usual ‘thrice oppressed’ (Chakravarty, 2012). Della in *Mysterious Ailment of Rupi Baski* is one such character who lived her life to the fullest, something that was unconventional in an era when women were believed to have certain restrictions to follow. The free-spirited person that she was, had constructed herself in such a manner that no societal lynching could affect her on her very existence:

*“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, she never lied about her whereabouts or about anything else...and was always ready to help those in need”* (Hansda, 2013)

Another potential character in the same novel is Putki who let her spirits high throughout the text. The two friends, Della and Putki, would sing aloud on the roads, jested “reckless, uninhibited, carefree” (Hansda, 2013), wander off to secluded corners outside the village with their respective partners. Putki drank life to the lees, “Putki like always, would drink herself to sleep” (Hansda 2017). Gita, the protagonist of the short story “Blue Baby” is an upright modern woman who defies conventional façade of chastity and takes a drastic step. She made a promiscuous plan to get married to Soren and would leave him once Dilip comes back professionally settled to claim her and their child. As a part of the plan and to never forget their unsurmountable love for each other, she gets impregnated by Dilip, the day before her marriage to Soren. In *The Mysterious Ailment of Rupi Baskey* Hansda mentions in his acknowledgement that it “takes cues from an incident which took place in my village and is a creation of village gossip” (Hansda, 2017). The conventional presentation of this tribal women has been deconstructed to bring forth the limited section of them who are essentially modern and unconventional and who have the competence to be the one as mainstream woman.

### **Empowerment Not Subjected to Social Position**

It is often believed that a woman can gain importance only when she has certain factors complimenting her. It could be her financial stability, her educational solidarity, her stable progeny running with generation old lineage or the societal competence. The most surprising part of Hansda’s presentation is that the women are not subjected to any social status and standard. It is not their background that decide and design their empowerment. The characters in Hansda’s works are either an outcast in an alien land, a poverty-stricken single mother, a prostitute, a witch, an ailing homemaker, a careless mother-in-law who slips into slumber with few doses of alcohol or an enchantress. None of them corroborates to any of the criteria that can give them importance to voice themselves. The characters are from varied background and the author convinces the reader that his women characters could be promising, challenging and indomitable irrespective of their lack of education, social and conjugal status. Each of the female characters come up from a compromising past yet they are domineering in their own way. They establish themselves as a strong homemaker who wins over a practitioner of Blackmagic and brings her husband back; as a poverty-stricken mother who tries hard to save her child from death but reaches late from work only to find that her only son has slipped into death; an outcast in an alien land who saves an entire family from getting burnt down by the angry mob; and a migrant worker who earns, at ease, few bucks and some food in exchange of gratifying someone’s carnal needs. Each of them is complete in herself and does not need any support from the male counterpart to fulfil their role.

In spite of the above illustrated facts, it is still the inevitable truth that the women in general are definitely at merciless position in Santhal community. They have

waded through the struggle led down by their society. Such facts, however, remain a matter of discussion. The realistic picture that Hansda has undertaken to be presented in his works also display the role of patriarchy that operates in his tribal community. He gives us such glimpses in his *écriture*. The plight of Santhal women is definitely the prime concern. They have to either bear the In the short story “Baso-Jhi”, the titular protagonist is stigmatised as the practitioner of Blackmagic and cause of death to multiple people. As a consequence, she was ill-treated by her own son on the death of her grandson: “Which evil gods do you worship, and how many children do you need for your sacrifices?” (Hansda 2017). She was kicked in her abdomen. The old woman screamed in pain and grief. The sons kept hurling abuses and kicks. Her house was demolished and she was abandoned. Another harsh fact that also finds place in the author’s narrative is the overpowering of the feminine physical beauty over her quality. The process of arranged marriage concept of choosing the bride for the son is completely male dominated where Hansda presents stereotypical beauty of the bride as a criterion to be judged to get married: “Rupi was pretty, submissive in the way all brides ought to be ...She was strong, healthy, strong-limbed, and her complexion was lighter than that of the other girls Khorda-haram had seen” (Hansda, 2013). Also, Bijoya in the short story “Baso-jhi”, is described as “While Bijoya’s gold medal could get her a good job, when it came to marriage negotiations, it intimidated suitors. With wrong sort of complexion - and her degree – she didn’t have many chances” (Hansda, 2017)

The helplessness in their daily life is projected in the characterisation of Subhashini, the single mother who is torn apart between her commitment to work and her motherhood. The honesty and dedication that is inherited in their very tribe is displayed through the characterisation of Subhashini. The day when her son was having high fever, she still went to work and was restless throughout her duty period and as she repeatedly kept her eyes on the watch, her colleague said, “Subhashini-didi, are you listening? Your son is running such a high fever and you are here to work! Are you mad?” (Hansda, 2017) Another reason for her reporting to work was that a day off from her work meant, a day cut in her wages. It would have been hard for her to afford a day loss in her wages. Such survival anxieties as it happens in the lives of Santhal women are heart-breaking and heart wrenching.

## **Conclusion**

The Santhal women have been deprived since time immemorial and the same has also been portrayed by academicians and authors in their *écriture* to voice their subjugation and the requirement of justice to maintain a society devoid of hierarchy. They have never presented these women’s prowess that already existed, although in sparse. The display of mettle that they have foregrounded has been picked by Hansda and brought to the notice of readers, belonging both to the broader society as well as their own community. This study aims to give a new dimension to the phallogocentric *écriture* that dominated the community, thereby subverting the same with a narration by the male author, authorising the prominence of the women in the community. Such texts definitely encourage the Santhal women of the present generation to realise their hidden potential and to break their conventional submissiveness. Hansda does his meticulousness in

crafting his women characters and his characterisation opens up a specific research area, on Santhal women, that has so far remained unexplored and unrecognised. The Santhal tribal community also needs women writers to give voice to their women. The voice not necessarily should involve their plight and exploitation but should definitely tend to lay bare their strength and empowerment that have remained unsung. Let the *écriture* come from women's 'phallos' (pen) so that the intricacies of gender inequality and prejudices evolve out from the community's core. Any marginal narration often generalises their society's issues. However, such generalisation fails to realise many unrecognised matters which do not meet general issues. The research paper leaves behind the generalised aspect of Santhal women's conventional subjugation and opens up a different arena that addresses their valour. They are recognised as rising above (s)exploitation as they have been identified. They are not always the agencies of meeting someone's carnal gratification or the inequality based on gender prejudices. They establish themselves rising above the hegemonical representation and Hansda gives voice to their empowerment that had gone submerged.

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