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THE ADIVASI WILL NOT DANCE: A DEFAMILIARIZING ENCOUNTER WITH 'OTHERNESS'

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Abstract

The portrayal of Adivasis in Indian English Fiction and in media narratives either completely romanticizes the community or demonizes them. This leads to the 'othering' of the Adivasis where a direct and raw encounter with them is not possible for the elite, urban, middle-class reader. Hansda Sowendra Shekhar, in his short story anthology *The Adivasi Will not Dance*, does not try to offer a filtered representation of the community. He rather offers the metropolitan reader a Defamiliarizing encounter with 'Otherness'. This Defamiliarization is realized by different narrative strategies like using a first-person narration, code-switching, unrelatable character and unreconciled endings. These stories present the daily struggles and aspirations of the Santhal community without treating them as a "noble savage" or providing romanticized accounts of their lives. Shekhar's representation does not only compel the modern reader to take notice of the 'other' but also opens new dimensions for this genre.

Keywords: Adivasis, Defamiliarization, Othering, Representation, Tribal literature

Introduction

Adivasi history has been marked by dispossession, subjugation and conflict. For an elite, metropolitan reader, the idea of the Adivasi is formulated and shaped through the narratives of media. These narratives either totally demonize or romanticize the Adivasis. A raw and direct encounter with the so called 'other', thus, is not possible. This encounter can be made possible not through familiarization but through defamiliarization, a narrative strategy that Hansda Sowendra Shekhar uses in his short story collection *The Adivasi Will not Dance*.

The narratives in Hansda Sowendra Shekhar's anthology are presented from an Adivasi

viewpoint. They offer graphic descriptions of sexual assault and land grabbing. As a result, the stories are shocking to Indian English audiences whose prior encounter with Adivasis has been from a position of privilege. The usual portrayal of Adivasis presents them as "noble savages" but this is not the case with this short story collection. The defamiliarization of the other is manifested in how art and the body are presented as means of subsistence, and in how the Adivasi are included into the hierarchical society. Therefore, Shekhar's other no longer remains the 'other'.

The Portrayal of the 'Other' in Indian English Literature:

In his book *Babu Fictions*, Tabish Khair, while discussing the representation of tribals in the Indian English Fiction, remarks, "it can actually be shown that the tribal in general has been even more obscured in Indian English fiction than in Anglo-Indian (colonial) fiction." (2001) The true portrayal of Adivasi has been very scant in Indian English fiction. In the very scant representation that the Adivasi get, they are either presented as violent Maoists or uneducated, subjugated objects of the elite gaze. Apart from this there is another form of representation accorded to the tribal people which is the idea of the pure and noble being who is close to God and nature. Another characteristic feature of these representations is their third person narration. Both objectification and romanticization of the tribals leads to an evasion of the true tribal subjectivity. It robs them off of their personhood and makes them the "other" not being capable of being in the mainstream.

The Adivasis in most of the Indian English narratives serve a symbolic function for the elite urban privileged class. In narratives like Neel Mukherjee's *The Lives of Others* (2015) and Upmanyu Chatterjee's *English, August* (2018) the tribal identity is reduced to being the objects serving as an "antithesis to [urban elite's] own troubled modernity" (Chakraborty 2017). It is always notable as an indicator of urban elite's search for a symbol of vanished innocence and purity depriving the reader of a realistic multidimensional account and only present to provide emotional comfort to the metropolitan middle classes that feel cut off.

In the light of this, the collection of short stories by Hansda Sowvendra Sekhar comes up as a vital intervention in Adivasi representation in Indian literature. The first-person narrative presents a defamiliarized picture of the nation-space while the title of the collection purposefully subverts the usual assumptions of the urban elite about Adivasis who are merely singing and dancing folk away from the urban corruption; the assumptions catered by Indian writings in English. It is clear in the ending lines of the book, "We Adivasis will not dance

anymore' – what is wrong with that? We are like toys – someone presses our 'ON' button, or turns a key in our backsides, and we Santhals start beating rhythms on our tamak and tumdak, or start blowing tunes on our tiriyo while someone snatches away our very dancing grounds. Tell me, am I wrong?" (p. 170) This defamiliarising encounter is made feasible by the author's attempt to use the voice of the narrator Mangal Murmu, a musician who was previously a farmer from the village of Matiajore in Jharkhand, to ventriloquize the consciousness of subalternized Tribals.

Defamiliarization as a Narrative Strategy in *The Adivasi Will Not Dance*:

Gayatri Chakravarty Spivak's argument of the subaltern not having a voice applies to most of the Indian English literature as well, where the writings generally cater to a certain section of elite and modern readers. Most of the Indian writings in English propagate "the idiom of an urban Indian English that is made to fabricate a distinctive Indian modernity in ways that are fraught with contradiction and paradox" (Varma 2015). Hansda Sowendra Shekhar's *The Adivasi Will not Dance* stands completely apart in terms of such representation. It rather provides the elite, metropolitan reader, an experience of coming face to face with the so called 'other' in the most unfiltered way possible.

The issues which are raised in the short stories of Sowendra Shekhar are not something alien or unknown to the modern reader. Issues of dislocation of tribes in the name of development, discrimination, sexual harassment etc. are often a part of the news but there is a difference between seeing and recognizing and empathizing. Shekhar, in his short stories, has tried to use various literary devices to let the readers encounter the raw and the real by giving an inside view of the lives of the so called "other". Defamiliarization is one such technique in art to show the seemingly familiar things in a different and strange way to make the perception of the familiar better. By cleverly manipulating the writing technique, Shekhar, makes the reader a part of the "other".

Most of the stories in this anthology contain first person voices. The story after which this collection has been named is narrated in the first person by Mangal Murmu, an Adivasi dance troupe owner. It starts with "They pinned me to the ground. They didn't let me speak." This creates a space for the modern reader to empathize with the speaker right from the beginning. Another story, "Getting Even", is narrated by the writer himself. These first person narrations and voices provide a defamiliarising encounter of the nation space. This narration tends to make a totally unrelated subject relatable, assimilating and alienating at the same time to increase the perception. For a modern, elite reader, the first-person account of Santhal experiences works at different levels. It is like hearing a story which you cannot relate to but empathize with. The author has tried to act as a ventriloquist to the thoughts of the subalternized community which enables a defamiliarizing encounter with otherness for the modern reader.

The stories do not try to offer a happy ending. There is no reconciliation at the end. It is just an account of the lives of the Adivasis and about keeping it as real as possible. Shekhar reveals the concealed cultural identity of the Adivasis and tries to deconstruct the common notion. He does not show any bias and does not try to offer a comforting portrayal of his own community. He explicitly portrays the sexual harassment of Adivasi girls in stories like "November is the Month of Migrations". He also, through his stories, points towards different economic classes within the Adivasis. There is a portrayal of Adivasi household in stories like "They Eat Meat" and "Sons". In stories like "Baso Jhi" he clearly tries to show how superstitions work within the Adivasi community. The readers form an emotional connection with the mother in "Desire, Divination and Death". Thus, the stories take you on a whole journey where the modern reader gets one step closer to knowing the "other".

In his quest for a realistic, unfiltered portrayal of the Adivasis, Shekhar does not even try to be politically correct. This unfiltered portrayal is what leads to the true defamiliarization of the urban reader because it offers no points of connection or relatability. He rather creates a world that is not

meant to please but to an extent horrify the modern reader. His short story collection was also banned by Jharkhand Government on the grounds of bad and obscene portrayal of the Santhals. Talking about the ban in an interview given to the Indian Express, Shekhar remarks, "I feel crippled but I am emboldened" (2018). The ban is indeed emboldening because it shows that the defamiliarization Shekhar wanted to achieve through his portrayal was achieved. For a modern, elite reader, Shekhar's portrayal is so horrifying that it becomes hard to believe that this might even be close to reality. An article written on the ban in Hindustan Times beautifully sums up what this short story collection is all about. It says, "These stories of Santhal lives are unsentimental renderings of quotidian struggles and aspirations, as opposed to representations of Disneyfied noble savages, infantilised adults and promiscuous strumpets that populate the non-indigenous imagination." (2017) This kind of a representation offers us characters that are true to life, who have daily struggles and challenges and who have way greater dimensionality than their media representation.

The characterization of Adivasis, which is generally flat in the Indian English Literature, is not flat here. The reader gets to explore each character in depth. The eponymous story lets the readers explore the character of Mangal Murmu in detail. His narration offers a defamiliarizing experience to the readers who do not know the other side of development projects from the perspective of someone who has really suffered. The characterization plays a very important role in providing this reading experience. In "They Eat Meat", the elite reader experiences the Gujarat riots and the conflict of religions from a whole new perspective. Similarly, in "Sons" and "Eating with the enemy" we closely get to see an Adivasi household through the familiar appearing defamiliarizing characters.

Shekhar, very cleverly, uses Santhali phrases within the stories and does not even provide an index for translation at the end. An example of this can be seen in the story "Desire, Divination and Death" where he uses phrases like "ki maasi, morte khujchhu" and "Morbek tor ma". Although it doesn't

hamper the reading experience but it provides an effect of Brechtian alienation where the modern reader suddenly feels out of the narrative and unfamiliar. This unfamiliarity increases the perception of the underlying issue thus giving a defamiliarizing experience to the metropolitan reader. Using Santhali also shows a claiming of the lost agency. The subaltern according to Spivak, are subordinated through the use of the dominant language and using the native language is an act of subversion of the authority.

Using vernacular phrases is also significant as they embody a sense of rootedness and authenticity that subverts the cultural essentialism of a dominant language. According to Bill Ashcroft, "Writers in this continuum employ highly developed strategies of code-switching and vernacular transcription, which achieve the dual result of abrogating the Standard English and appropriating an English as a culturally significant discourse." (45) They act as defamiliarizing examples that make us recognise that we have encountered a conscience and culture that cannot be incorporated into any privileged Indian culture and identity.

Most of the postcolonial writers use similar literary techniques to give a voice to the silenced subaltern and to self-present their often-under-represented identity. The stylistic techniques don't only have aesthetic importance but also work at an ideological level in terms of the reception, resistance and response to an unbiased cultural narrative. Aesthetic techniques like defamiliarization, achieved through characters, language and narration, also work at an ideological level for the metropolitan reader to increase familiarity with the "other".

Conclusion

Shekhar's short story collection, *The Adivasi will not Dance* can be called a groundbreaking piece in the field of Indian writing in English and specifically literature talking about Adivasis because it moves away from the usual It does not only engage with the enslavement of Adivasis but also paints a picture of a subaltern tribal consciousness that differs noticeably from those previously created by the authors writing from a position of privilege. The privilege being talked about here comes from being

in an elite, urban, middle-class, metropolitan set-up. This essay provides an analysis of defamiliarization as a narrative technique used in this connection. This also helps Shekhar to provide a harsh critique of the postcolonial nation-state in its neoliberal guise, which is consistent with the experiences of indigenous groups.

Avoiding cliches and romanticization, the entire text in its details, provides an exceptional window into Adivasi life that compels one to take notice of the 'other'. In addition to opening up new opportunities for the development of Indian writing in English at a time when it frequently faced criticism for either being too critical or too romantic, Sowendra Sekhar's sharp understanding of the cultural and material conditions of the subalternized Adivasis also sheds light on new directions for this genre.

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