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### Narrating Tribal Nationalist Goddess: A Critical Appraisal of Dr. Rajesh Vankar's *Heer*

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**Abstract:** *The national struggle for freedom of India was not only a socio-political movement but it was made significant by some freedom fighters who instilled mythological and religious motifs, images and symbols. By doing so, they encouraged the Indians to fight for morality and righteousness which was understood as dharma during those times. Further, this motivated the people of India to fight against the colonial rule for their socio-political, economic, cultural, spiritual and religious rights. Moreover, the fact was visible that the colonial masters had also looted the religious rights of Indians and therefore this struggle for Independence was also marketed as the fight of dharma (good, righteousness, morality) against adharma (evil, lawlessness and immorality). The present article analyses Dr. Rajesh Vankar's 2022 novella, Heer and it explores how the novelist has portrayed the protagonist as nationalist goddess who made invaluable contribution in the national freedom movement of India. An attempt to excavate the contribution of tribal freedom fighters in India is also made with a view to rejuvenate the history of India*

**Keywords:** *national struggle, freedom, movement, mythological, religious*

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The national struggle for freedom of India was not only a socio-political movement but it was made significant by some freedom fighters who instilled mythological and religious motifs, images and symbols. By doing so, they encouraged the Indians to fight for morality and righteousness which was understood as dharma during those times. Further, this motivated the people of India to fight against the colonial rule for their socio-political, economic, cultural, spiritual and religious rights. Moreover, the fact was visible that the colonial masters had also looted the religious rights of Indians and therefore this struggle for Independence was also marketed as the fight of *dharma* (good, righteousness, morality) against *adharma* (evil, lawlessness and immorality). The present article analyses Dr. Rajesh Vankar's 2022 novella, *Heer* and it explores how the novelist has portrayed the protagonist as nationalist goddess who made invaluable contribution in the national freedom movement of India. An attempt to excavate the contribution of tribal freedom fighters in India is also made with a view to rejuvenate the history of India.

The colonial masters have conceptualized, adopted and implemented cruel and illegal policies to exploit Indians. The educated Indian nationalists, on the one hand, tried to market, advertise and expose them globally to show the real motifs behind the missionary and welfare activities of the British. Some freedom fighters connected the freedom struggle with religion and religious issues which helped them to mobilize Indians to actively contribute in this mass movement. Therefore, it is proper to state that there was a complex interplay which can be identified between politics, religion, identity, culture and economy during the freedom



movement in India. During colonial period, the tribal people of India had also opposed the colonial regime and they resisted against the cruel policies of the British because the colonisers had tried to intrude their indigenous cultural eco-system. The colonial masters tried to loot the forest rights of the tribal and therefore these people had resisted against the cruel and inhuman policies of the British.

In his speeches and writing, Gandhi has insisted on the significance of religious motifs, symbols, myths and images which could be useful for mobilizing and inspiring diverse people of the nation for freedom struggle against the British rule. He knew the importance of these tools which connect people culturally and emotionally for a cause which can be identified as righteous and moral. Religious beliefs of truth, righteousness, honesty, loyalty and unity were skillfully used with a purpose to mobilize the Indian mass for freedom of the nation. *Indian Freedom Struggle: The Role of Sadhus and Sants* by H.P Shastri is an enlightening book which describes the invaluable contribution of saints and religious organizations such as Arya Samaj and Ramkrishna Mission. In this book, the vision of Swaraj is connected with socio-religious issues.

Dr. Rajesh Vankar is a popular writer in Gujarati literature. He works as Assistant professor in one of the government colleges of Gujarat. As a novelist, poet and short story writer of Gujarat, he has exposure to the ethos of Gujarat. Specifically, he writes about the socio-culturally and economically deprived Dalit and tribal people. His stay at tribal area for a long time has been beneficial and he has penned many creative works on the lives and problems of tribal people. He celebrates the tribal culture including its unique songs, rituals, beliefs and socio-religious customs in his works. It is important to mention here that the writer, in his literary works, also tries to expose their socio-economic conditions in current neo-colonial world where they face the dilemma of adjusting with the modernity on the one hand and maintenance of their own specific culture on the other. Due to Dr. Vankar's command over local language and dialects in the tribal belt of Gujarat helps him to write about the tribal people in authentic ways and exposing their displacement and stress in the fast-developing world. He glorifies the oral traditions of the tribals in his works and popularise them globally.

In his Gujarati novella, *Heer: A Struggle for Rights of Forest*, Dr. Vankar describes how the colonial masters exploited the tribal people during colonial period. It is published in 2022. The story is set in the British Raj. The word 'Adivasi' means those who are the owners of the land or the indigenous people. The British tries to loot their property and land during colonial regime. The writer shows how an Adivasi girl resists the exploitative and oppressive policies and plans of the British who tried to intrude the tribal land and harass the women. To secure the rights of land is the key issue discussed in the novella. The writer exposes the violent interactions between the tribals and the colonial masters. As a tribal girl, Heer had to play a crucial role in colonial India. S.N Tripathy mentions about the loot of resources of India by the British:

The plunder of the wealth and resources of this vast territory and the life and the labour of its people and finally absolute domination for the last two centuries by the Britishers, reduced Indian people to a miserably impoverished mass. East India Company acted as the vehicle for draining India's wealth into Britain.<sup>1</sup>

By presenting the problem of intrusion into the local area of the tribal, the writer illustrates many issues which relates to the cruelty of colonisers and their inhuman attempts to rape the tribal women. The indigenous body of the woman is symbolised and magnified as the indigenous structure of the land on which the British masters tried to intrude. The intrusion and exploitation into the personal as well as the cultural regimes of the tribal people are highlighted



by the writer. Heer, the representative of the tribals in the novella is presented as the goddess of them. The writer shows how she struggle not only for the tribal rights of the forest land but also for the illegal intrusion of the colonial masters into the tribal eco-system and their unique culture. She kills the British who tries to rape a tribal girl. The writer shows how the colonised woman is considered to be an object of entertainment by the colonisers. It is noted:

The nineteenth century witnessed the consolidation of British power in India and the acceleration of Western contact which brought far-reaching changes in the social structure. Detailed studies of women's status do not exist for early nineteenth century but the information available suggests that political disruption further eroded their status.<sup>2</sup>

Here, an indirect connection can be referred to the widely discussed discourse of that times when India was enslaved by the British. During this period, the White European feminists popularised feminism in the Western countries and tried to protect the body and minds of the White women. This White feminist discourse is rightly considered to be racial and discriminative in present times because the Black activists and feminists of the colonised and third world countries exposed that the black or colonised woman was exploited and marginalised in many ways. Especially, the colonised woman is doubly exploited in her life. The murder of the white soldier by Heer implies distortion of patriarchal and male-centred control in multiple as well as complicated ways. Bharati Ray points out:

Women's bodies have been the site of major polemics on gender. While they have been historically, loaded with signification, three notions obstinately persist in the context of India. First, women's bodies are for procreation, second women's bodies are for men's enjoyment, and thus sexual agency on the part of women threatens the social order, and third women's bodies are the repositories of men's honour, linked to the honour/shame of the community and the nation.<sup>3</sup>

In the novella, the writer shows the colonial intrusion into the tribal culture and their attempts to oppress the tribal people by looting their lands and property. He shows their actions which were oppressive and violent. Dr.Vankar exposes how the natural resources of India were looted by the British during the colonial times. Shashi Tharoor in his recent book shows how the indigenous people became the victims of the violence and cruelty of the colonisers as the British targeted to loot natural resources of India during colonial period. Through this novella, he glorifies the attempts of resistance against the British Raj and celebrates the contribution of unsung freedom fighters from the Tribal community of India who tried to protect the land and people from the attacks of the colonial masters. Dr.Vankar's novella is enlightening text because the writer has sincerely tried to explore issue of the contribution of the tribal people in the freedom struggle of India. It is significant to note that he has magnified the marginality and provided space for further research in this area of knowledge.

The story of the novella is well-researched. The writer presents the socio-economic and cultural system of Jambughoda, a small area in Gujarat. He describes the tribal residents of this area and their socio-cultural environment. He shows how Heerbai, the goddess who emerged as a protector of tribal culture and property is worshipped in this area. He describes her story and how she resisted against the colonial masters. The novella is the story of her martyrdom. In it, the writer has attempted to glorify a tribal woman martyr who had sacrificed her life for the freedom of the nation. The work can be considered as a sincere effort to rejuvenate tribal ethos and revisit their stories of bravery and courage.



Recently, India is celebrating its 75<sup>th</sup> Anniversary of independence which is glorified as *Azadi ka Amritmahotsav*. In this period of celebration, the novella has emerged as a prominent work of literature which inspires researchers to excavate those unsung tribal and Dalit freedom fighters whose contribution for the freedom struggle has not been mentioned or popularised due to internal politics of the country after freedom. As a literary work, the writer has attempted to show the path towards decolonising India from the colonial imprints which tried to marginalise, discriminate and divide people. It is an attempt which can inspire the scholars to search for the stories of freedom fighters who contributed in the national movement during the colonial period.

Dr.Vankar shows how tribal people worship Heer as Heerbai, the Goddess of their community in Jambughoda in Panchamahar District of Gujarat. He expresses how this worship is not just religious but these tribal people have glorified Heer as nationalist Goddess who had sacrificed her life for the freedom of this nation. She had not only resisted against the violent intrusion of the British in the forest but she also emerged as a prominent tribal feminist of her area who could protect and educate the tribal woman. The writer shows Heer as a powerful nationalist and a representative of Indian feminism which opposed the cruel colonial powers which were male-centred and capitalist. The socio-political issue of colonial domination is connected with the emergence of a goddess who saves people from the colonial masters. The religious beliefs of the tribal people are connected with the issues of colonisation of the nation and the writer glorifies Heer as saviour of the Tribal as well as the nation.

After describing present socio-cultural scenario of the tribal people of Jambughoda, the writer leads his readers into past. He describes the historic adventures of Heer who is presently devoted as Heerbai, the goddess. He depicts how she was born and brought up as brave and courageous girl. He describes the colonial attack and how Heer saved a local girl from the British soldiers who try to rape her. The writer also describes how the tribal woman were victimised during colonial period. As enthusiastic and adventurous girl, Heer realises that it is important to learn how to use rifle. With a purpose to initiate a revolt against the colonial regime, she mobilises tribal people and enlightens them how they were objectified and enslaved by the colonisers. She educates them regarding the exploitative and oppressive policies of the British and how the colonial masters loot the property and land of the tribals. Under her leadership, the tribal freedom fighters attacked the British collector in Godhara. Their aim was to get freedom from the British. Her bravery was appreciated by the British officers. The writer shows how a common girl had emerged as a martyr for the nation.

The writer has woven political issue of colonial encounter and connected it with religious beliefs of the tribal people. This is one of the significant aspects of the novella because Heer is now devoted as a nationalist goddess who had sacrificed her life for the freedom of the nation. The historical facts and political story of Heer is connected with the local rituals and beliefs of the Tribal people who celebrates her as their Goddess who emerged as a powerful protector. The writer has sincerely recreated the story of a tribal freedom fighter from oral folk tales, legends, myths and local stories. His attempt to fictionalise a tribal girl's contribution in the national struggle is praiseworthy.

To sum up, it is significant to note that Dr. Vankar has revisited the great Indian struggle for independence and narrated the contribution of a common tribal girl. He has blended many post-colonial issues including eco-criticism and feminism and explored how the colonialism was not only an attempt to dominate over Indians politically. Its repercussions and outcomes were wide and complex. The writer has described the oppressive aspect of colonialism. He describes how the colonisers treated Indians as slaves and how they tried to intrude the personal



domains of the colonised persons. Heer had not only protected the rights of the tribals but she had also resisted against the capitalist intrusion to her land. She saves the pure and organic ecosystem of her area from the capitalist British. As a tribal leader, she aims to protect the forest from the colonisers who desires to intrude into it with a purpose to exploit the natural resources. The writer has blended many aspects of the character of Heer as she emerged as the saviour of tribal culture, nature and land. She can be also praised as a protector of nature from the capitalist system or a feminist who exposed the male-centric and exploitative face of the coloniser. By portraying the courage of Heer, the tribal girl and glorifying her character as a nationalist Goddess, Dr.Vankar has contributed in the postcolonial discourse of identifying those unsung martyrs who sacrificed their lives for freedom of India.

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