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Resilience, Resistance, and Reclaiming Tribal Identity in Hansda Sowvendra Shekhar's "My Father's Garden"

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Abstract: This paper offers a thought-provoking analysis of Hansda Sowvendra Shekhar's novel "My Father's Garden" as a strong representation of the Adivasi experience today around the powerful themes of determination, resistance and reclaiming of identity. Central to the story is the symbolic "garden" that is a metaphor for the Santhal people's deep and spiritual attachment to their forefathers' homeland. This site, both memory-rich and symbolic, is a direct contrast to the disenchantment and alienation of the broader socio-political environment. The reading sees the novel as literature, but also as an act of narrative self-affirmation a kind of Adivasi self-representation that challenges common stereotypes and re-establishes the right to tell their own story. In the return of the protagonist to Ghatsila and the subtle, frequently unuttered communication between father and son, the novel reveals a multi-layered conversation on identity, restoration and cultural permanence. It is a bridge between generations to reconnect Santhal traditions in the face of continuing marginalisation. Essentially, "My Father's Garden" is a reflection of contemporary Adivasi consciousness - one that is embedded in indigenous tradition and actively engaged with the socio-political nuances of the times.

Keywords: Identity, Resistance, Sovereignty, Ecocriticism, Subaltern, Intergenerational Dialogue.

In the setting of modern Indian literature, the coming out of Adivasi authors represents a significant transition from marginalization to substantial representation. Following centuries of silence and misrepresentation, these voices introduce genuine, earthy accounts reflecting the complexity of tribal existences in the face of the forces of modernity, political disenfranchisement, and cultural forgetting. Such a strong voice is that of Hansda Sowvendra Shekhar, whose novel *My Father's Garden* provides an intimate description of what it is to be a Santhal man in present-day India. The essay posits that the novel can be seen as a survival and cultural assertion narrative, drawn from personal experience to comment on wider political and communal conflicts. The garden of the father is a powerful symbol of ancestral connection to land symbolizing strength, continuation, and endurance in a world in which mainstream politics ignores tribal communities. The novel is also a work of narrative self-determination, reclaiming Adivasi identity from elite paradigms. The return of the protagonist to his home town of Ghatsila marks a process of self-discovery based on cultural memory. In the background, meanwhile, the father-son dynamics demonstrate how historical trauma, resilience, and intergenerational history inform tribal identity. Beneath these complex themes, Shekhar's writing is a necessary addition to discussions regarding tribal resistance, self-representation, and enduring struggle for cultural preservation.

At the center of "My Father's Garden" is a place that is both geographical and deeply figurative: the father's garden. This carefully tended piece of earth is in marked contrast to the



wasteland of his political defeat and the emotional wasteland of his son's existence. It is much more than a pastime; it is an asylum, a living representation of the continuing Adivasi bond with *jal, jangal, jameen* (forest, water, land). In a world determined to marginalize and dispossess them, the garden is an act of reclamation, a tiny piece of sovereign territory where the father is able to exert a kind of control and creativity unavailable to him in the wider political sphere. Critically, the garden stands as an embodiment of a harmonious relationship with nature that is at the heart of Santhal ideology, an ideology that interprets land not as something to be used and discarded, but as a supportive force with which one must work in harmony. The father, a one-time activist and political figure, has tasted the bitter pill of disillusionment. As narrator says, "...when a party member had asked one of the local Diku leaders to support my father's candidature, he reacted, 'Ab kya yeh nar-vaanar bhi aayega Sabha mein?'" (Shekhar, *My Father's Garden*, 2018, p. 154). His entry into the mainstream politics, hoping to fight for the rights of his people, ends in defeat and isolation. As narrator mentions, "And, as with everything he did in life, once he decided, he threw all his energies into joining the party (Shekhar, *My Father's Garden*, p. 154). He is a man lost, bereft of his public voice and authority. But it is in his return to the land that he discovers a new kind of purpose and dignity. The act of gardening of planting, caring for, and harvesting is a creative act. It is a silent, stubborn act of resistance against the forces of erasure. While the political system has not served him, the earth does. It rewards his stewardship with sustenance and beauty, and in doing so, it confirms his value and his place within an inherited way of life. The garden itself is an embodiment of Adivasi resilience, proving a capacity to grow life and meaning even in the driest and most inhospitable of settings. It represents a turning inward, not one of defeat, but as a calculated withdrawal toward a well of foundational strength.

For the narrator, the garden is an anchor. As he is living through his own identity crises, sexuality issues, and questions of belonging, the memory and presence of the garden provide a counter to the alienation of his life in the world. His love relationships are short-term and painful, his identity fragmented, but the garden is something steady a source of stability and rootedness. It is a tangible proof of the heritage he is trying to comprehend and assimilate. The garden vegetables and fruits are not simply a meal; they are bearers of remembrance, flavor, and sense of location. They tie him back to his father, his people, and the very ground of Ghatsila. As narrator says, "In all the time that he was away, the affairs of the village were very much on his mind. He always worried about Kessorepur..." (Shekhar, *My Father's Garden*, 2018, p. 146). This sense of attachment to land is depicted as inherent to Santhal identity. In a postcolonial scenario in which tribal lands have been consistently alienated and natural systems ravaged, the father's tiny, thriving garden is an act of resistance. It is a testament that even when deprived of huge tracts of land, the prime connection between the people and the soil can still be kept intact and cared for even in the most minute of areas, representing an unbending spirit that cannot be doused by political or economic exclusion.

In addition to the symbolism contained within its covers, the fact that "My Father's Garden" exists at all is an act of resistance. The book is an excellent example of what might be called "Adivasi self-writing" an active attempt to claim back narrative authority from the dominating culture. For generations, Adivasi narrative has been material for others to write. This outside authorship, however sympathetic, always brings its own templates, prejudices, and interpretations. Shekhar's novel breaks this mold. By writing out of the Santhal experience, he claims for his people the right to define itself, to represent its own nuances, and to speak its own truths. This is the very essence of narrative sovereignty: the freedom to narrate one's own history in one's own voice. The book defies the simplistic stereotypes that have long



characterized the depiction of tribal characters in Indian fiction. The narrator is not a noble savage or an innocent victim. He is a flawed, imperfect, and thoroughly human person. He is a medical man, educated and literate, but he is also struggling with deep-seated insecurities, exploring his sexuality, and trying to find a footing with his family and his heritage. (Shekhar, *My Father's Garden*, 2018, pp. 9-13). This multifaceted representation is a revolutionary act. It contradicts the reductionist representations that have functioned to "other" Adivasi individuals, making them existentially other from the "mainstream." Shekhar offers a character who is most certainly modern and at the same time inextricably linked to his Santhal self, illustrating that these two conditions are not exclusive of each other. This refusal to be stereotyped is an act of literary resistance to the reductionist look of the dominant culture.

Furthermore, the novel's blunt honesty is a compelling counter-narrative. Shekhar will not shy away from the unsavory realities of his world poverty, political repression, internal conflict, and personal vulnerability. The narrator's history of heartbreak and his unflinching analysis of his bodily relationship are offered without moralistic disapproval, a stark contrast to the typically sanitized presentation of Adivasi life. This unvarnished, unsentimental vision is a refusal of the imperative to present a "respectable" or idealized face of the group to the outside world. From the perspective of postcolonial theory, it is an important gesture. It is a refusal of the subaltern's obligation to play a rendition of itself that the dominant power apparatus will allow. Instead, it enunciates the right to represent the whole gamut of human experience, the beautiful and the grotesque, the victorious and the tragic. By writing "*My Father's Garden*," Shekhar is not so much telling a story; he is undertaking a political act of self-representation, a space in which a more real, richer, and sovereign Adivasi identity can be seen and known on its own terms.

One of the pivotal arcs in "*My Father's Garden*" is the return of the narrator to his native home in Ghatsila. Narrator says, "I said goodbye to Lucknow, collected my documents from the office of the university, and reached Ghatsila" (Shekhar, *My Father's Garden*, 2018, p. 13). This return is not merely a physical one; it is a spiritual pilgrimage towards self-discovery and identity assertion. Having been battered by the impersonal and frequently alienating forces of the larger world medical school, the nuances of romantic love, the covert and overt discrimination the narrator turns to his origins in search of comfort and definition. Therefore narrator say, "I sought and found love, and love, of sorts, found me" (Shekhar, *My Father's Garden*, 2018, p. 14). The trip home represents an escape from a universe in which his identity is questioned and negated to a place where it is a given. It is in Ghatsila, within the known environment of his family and society, that he is able to start mending the scattered pieces of himself. The "Father" part of the novel is especially crucial to this development. The narrator's homecoming enables him to view his father not only as a remote, commanding authority, but as a human being with his own career of struggle, passion, and disappointment. He sees his father's love for the garden, his silent routine, and his unspoken strength. This sight brings a new form of comprehension and sympathy. The house, and particularly the garden, is a classroom in which the narrator learns the unspoken lessons of his heritage. He is taught about perseverance not out of a book, but observing his father care for his plants after a life spent in political struggle. He is taught about connection to the earth not out of a political poster, but savoring the food that was raised in their own ground. This homecoming is one of re-grounding, of getting his feet on the firm earth of his heritage. This search for comfort and reconnecting to his Santhal heritage is a thread that runs through the novel. The narrator says, after seeing the unity among the Ho boys, "We should join them, and others... We must unite" (Shekhar, *My Father's Garden*, 2018, p. 142). In the nameless city streets, his Adivasi identity was



perhaps vulnerability or a sign of otherness. In Ghatsila, it is the definition of him. The language, the food, the social norms, the common history all of these things serve to reaffirm a part of him that has been under siege. His journey home is not a return to a primitive past, as a stereotypical tale would have it. Rather, it is an act of survival, a gathering of strength. It is a realization that a sense of self needs a sense of roots. The comfort he is searching for is not in escaping the modern world, but in blending his modern self with his ancestral self. The affirmation of his identity is in the realization that his Santhal identity is not a relic of the past to be locked away in a museum, but a living, breathing part of him that imparts strength, meaning, and a unique perspective into the world. The homecoming is ultimately a homecoming to his inner self, a rediscovery that true belonging comes from a true connection to one's origins.

The narrator's relationship with his father is the emotional center of the book and a potent vehicle for investigating the transfer of identity between generations. This intergenerational conversation is subtle, often occurring in the gaps between words, in shared activity, and in unwritten understandings. It is a dialogue on the past, present, and future of the Santhal people, acted out in the family setting of a single household. The father is a generation who waged their struggles on the frontlines of official politics, trusting in the potential of organized movements and parliamentary representation. The narrator remarks "...he might even become a Member of Parliament from a brand new state" (Shekhar, *My Father's Garden*, 2018, p. 162). His ultimate retreat to his garden is a quiet recognition of the futility of that strategy. He bears the burden of a shared history of strife and personal wounds of his own political betrayal.

The narrator himself is a representative of a new generation. He is the result of what his father's generation struggled for, the opportunities and the challenges. He is educated, professional, and better integrated into the non-Adivasi world (p.144, 155). However, he is even more alienated, with an identity crisis that is less defined than that of his father's. His conflicts are more inner, dealing with personal identity, love, and belonging. The conversation between them, thus, is a negotiation between two modes of being and resisting. The father's resilience lies in the ground and his deep, instinctual connection to his people's history. The son's quest is to discover his own kind of resilience, one that can include his contemporary experiences without cutting his ties to his ancestors. The narrator says, "Today, my earliest memories are not Ghatsila but of Kessorepur. The large ancestral house, the trees around it, the jaher which forbidden to us, my many cousins, uncles and aunts" (Shekhar, *My Father's Garden*, 2018, p. 147). Their silent dialogues are especially moving. When they toil together in the garden or dine together, they are engaging in a ritual of union that doesn't require words. As Nitya Rao says, "Globally, land is key to the identity of indigenous people" (Rao, 2023, p. 17). The father teaches about the land, and in that, he shares with them a part of their heritage. The narrator, by learning this and by watching his father, comes to know the rich reservoir of strength from which his community and his family have drawn for generations. This is no one-way, easy passing down of tradition. It is a process that is alive. The narrator is not just a passive receiver of his father's ideology; he challenges it, grapples with it, and eventually incorporates it into his own, more nuanced vision of reality. This conversation addresses the fundamental question of how a community keeps its identity intact while evolving in a world that is changing. It proposes that the community's future lies not in holding on tightly to the past, but in this ongoing, developing dialogue among generations, where tragedy, trauma, and hope are intertwined with common history to form a strong, progressive sense of identity.



In conclusion, “My Father’s Garden” is a significant and fundamental book that remakes the borders of Indian writing. Hansda Sowvendra Shekhar has written a novel that is deeply personal and politically charged, and provides a precious and unique insight into the modern Adivasi condition. By transcending the simplistic traditions of tradition vs. modernity, victim vs. oppressor, the novel formulates a new Adivasi modernity narrative one that is multifaceted, self-referential, and unabashedly authentic. The exposition of the novel’s meaning through the interrelated themes of resilience, resistance, and reclamation uncovers its complex architecture and its underlying purpose. The garden becomes a powerful metaphor for the sacred, life-sustaining bond with the earth, a source of gentle strength amidst political din and defeat. The book itself, as an exercise in Adivasi self-representation, is itself a work of narrative resistance, the recovery of the right to narrate oneself and a challenge to the hegemonic, stereotype-driven gaze. The journey of the narrator back to Ghatsila is a search of survival and affirmation of identity, a re-grounding in the earth of his origins. Ultimately, the delicate and sophisticated intergenerational dialogue between son and father shed light on the mechanism by which identity is negotiated and passed down within a community, integrating the wisdom of the past into the tapestry of the future. In the end, “My Father’s Garden” is a testament to the indomitable spirit of the Santhal people. It is a testament to finding strength in one’s heritage, to nurturing hope amidst hopelessness, and to the bravado of forging one’s own identity in a world that is always trying to define you. It is an important contribution not just to Adivasi writing but to world writing, presenting a global tale of the human quest for belonging, love, and home.

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