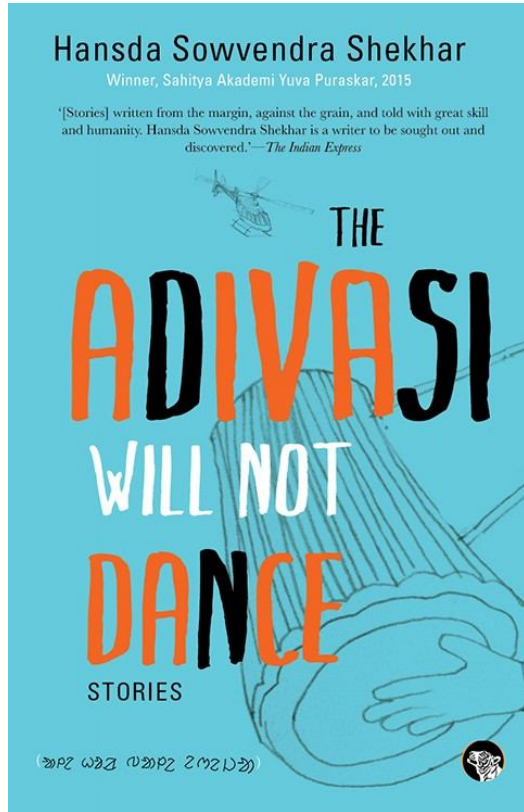


## Review Article

# ***The Adivasi Will Not Dance: Stories* by Hansda Sowvendra Shekhar**



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Reviewed by  
Priyanka Tripathi  
Assistant Professor of English (Indian Institute  
of Technology Patna), India.  
Email: [priyankatripathi@iitp.ac.in](mailto:priyankatripathi@iitp.ac.in)

Postcolonial formations lead to the spaces of cultural consumption where it is open to scrutiny way beyond the polemical and political correctness of an individual or a State. Several instances in the literary tradition of India clearly indicate that whenever the feeble voice of the margins have grown loud and strong enough to be heard at the centre, the centre is left with no other option but to 'listen'. One such text that represents this phenomenon in the contemporary times is Sahitya Akademi Yuva Puraskar recipient Hansda Sowvendra Shekhar's *The Adivasi Will Not Dance* (2015). A collection of ten short stories dealing with *Adivasis* from Jharkhand, referred as *Santhals*, the book is an insightful representation of *Santhali* life and culture.

The title story, "Adivasi will not Dance" is a moving tale of Mangal Murmu, an old man who has trained dance troupes for years but refuses to sing and dance for a high profile function. Shekhar writes that a major inspiration for this short story came to the writer in 2013 when President Pranab Mukherjee was visiting Jharkhand to inaugurate an ambitious thermal plant project which also implied that *Adivasis* will be displaced from their lands making them 'homeless'. This had led to minor agitation amongst the *Adivasis* as it did not correspond with the egalitarian view of the State and responded well to the fears of Karl Marx, propounded in his

theory, the ‘Law of Increasing Poverty’ in which ‘the rich get richer and the poor get poorer’. In his narrative, he renders voice and words to the unspoken sentiments of the *Santhals*. Breaking the stereotype where the margins remain tacit under the tyrannous utterance of the centre, Mangal Murmu announces,

‘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)

The last lines of the short story raise some deep-seated questions validating the growing industrialisation at the cost of the tribals, making the reader ponder over the booming economy and rethink of Victor Hugo’s quote that states, “...there is always more misery among the lower classes than there is humanity in the higher...” (p. 7). He writes,

We will sing and dance before you but tell us, do we have a reason to sing and dance? Do we have a reason to be happy? You will now start building the power plant, but this plant will be the end of us all, the end of all the Adivasi. These men sitting beside you have told you that this power plant will change our fortunes, but these same men have forced us out of our homes and villages. We have nowhere to go, nowhere to grow our crops. How can this power plant be good for us? And how can we Adivasis dance and be happy? Unless we are given back our homes and land, we will not sing and dance. We Adivasis will not dance. The Adivasi will not – (p. 187)

The first short story, “The Eat Meat!” is about Panmuni-jhi and her husband Biram-Soren, who get transferred to Vadodara after living for almost two decades in Bhubaneswar. Mr Rao, their new landlord considers that ‘people believe in purity’ (6) in this city. Mr Rao also suggests them to give up their non-vegetarian food and abstain from revealing their tribal identity. The *Sorens* do ‘confirm’ to the assumed rules of the State as Shekhar appropriately mentions, “In Odisha, Panmuni-jhi could be Santhal, an Odia, a Bengali. In Gujarat, she had to be only a Gujarati” (p. 14). However, the conspicuous unity in the divided neighbourhood is rightly captured by the author towards the end of the short story when the Gujarat riots take place in 2002 and the neighbours come together against the rioters.

One of the most heart-rending tales of poverty and helplessness in the collection is the third story, titled, “November is a Month of Migrations”. Epitomised through a 20-year-old girl, Talamai who is going to Bardhaman district of West Bengal with her family to plant rice and other crops in farms owned by *zamindars* of Bardhaman depicts the extremes that poverty can lead to. At the railway platform, she is approached by a young *jawan* who carries out a sexual transaction with her only for “two pieces of cold bread pakora and a fifty-rupee note” (p. 42). This particular short story infuriated many readers and critics and Shekhar was accused for objectifying the *Adivasi* women. However, there was another reading to the short story that clearly indicated that in no way was the story meant to titillate but reflected the painful, disturbing and sad state of *Adivasi* for whom every day was a struggle to survive. The writer also commented that even with its very explicit descriptions of sex there was nothing romantic about it.

Other short stories in the collection like, “Sons” is about Kalpana-di, wife of a corrupt bank manager and her spoilt son, Suraj. In contrast to Kalpana-di, her cousin Vidya-di is introduced who has a humble family. Her son, Raghu becomes a doctor towards the end of the story whereas Suraj ends up in jail. The author in his most simplistic style and language indicates,

“We Adivasi are very bad at stealing. Corruption isn’t in our blood” (p. 32). Shekhar, taking his cue from other aspects of *Santhali* life creates his other stories in the collection around *Santhali* characters and their experiences within and beyond themselves. “Getting Even” is a story of dreadful revenge, where a boy, perhaps of nine or ten year old is implicated on false charges of rape of a four year old girl. “Eating with the Enemy” is about Sulochana and husband’s another wife, Mohini and their bonding over needy/greedy times. “Blue Baby” is the story of love and betrayal where Gita marries Suren but carries a love-child with Dilip, her lover before marriage. “Baso-jhi” is about Basanti and her dreadfully painful experiences with superstition in the *Adivasi* society. First, she is thrown away by her own sons accusing her to be witch and then charged by Pushpa, her new refuge, to be a *dahni* – witch (p. 122) after three consecutive deaths take place in Sarjomdih. “Desire, Divination and Death” narrates the story of Subhashini and her ailing son and “Merely a Whore” traverses through the bestial terrain of prostitution through Sona, the protagonist.

On the surface, *The Adivasi Will Not Dance* may well appear to be a riveting tale of the face-off between the tribals and the State, but a layered interpretation of the stories may read it to be a confrontation of the hierarchies of the society – the powerful and the powerless, the rich and the poor. Despite dealing with events like human-trafficking, prostitution, women’s abuse, witch-hunting etc. *The Adivasi Will Not Dance* is perhaps not a politicised writing. Contradicting the allegations that his stories are politically charged, Shekhar remarks that his book isn’t “political in the electoral sense rather it explores themes that are socio-political” (*The Hindu*, December 02, 2016).

Creating a kind of counter-narrative to the Euro-centric one, clearly reminding us of Baldwin’s more than appropriated phrase ‘bear the burden’ by Achebe where he mentions that English as a language has the ability to bring out the native experience without altering much with the language (Ashcroft, 2009, p. 109), *The Adivasi Will Not Dance* liberally but very appropriately uses words from *Santhali* language. Words common in the *Santhali* vocabulary like *jawan* (soldier), *pitha* (sweet dish), *lungi*, *gamcha*, *saya* (types of wearing cloth), *mathabhangji* (broken head) are used within the sentences without giving any appendix. Quite unapologetic about refashioning the English language to suit the *Santhali* sentiments, he comments, “Glossaries are destructive. You come across a word, then you have to turn 200 pages to see its meaning, and then turn back to the story, It’s best to go with the flow” (*The Hindu*, December 02, 2016).

The stories mainly depict the lives of *Santhals* from the Jharkhand region, constantly struggling to live their life with dignity in this mineral-rich land where corporate takeovers and development anthem is trending. The characters in the collection may/may not be real but the issues, the violence and the treatment that he depicts in his fiction is surely relevant to our times as the Ideologies of State has the potential to be major threat to the democratic and diverse fabric of the Indian society. In nutshell, these distinctive stories attempt towards sensitizing the society regarding various issues in society and especially the ones with the *Santhals*. What Pablo Picasso once said about great art: “Art is never being chaste...Where it is chaste, it is not art” (p. 182) holds true in this context as well. I echo the same sentiment as the writer himself, “What the point is of just liking a book...They should bring about some change” (*The Hindu*, December 02, 2016).

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