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Echoes of Dissent: The Adivasi Resistance Policy in Hansda Sowvendra Shekhar's The Adivasi Will Not Dance

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Abstract

This paper critically explores the theme of resistance in Hansda Sowvendra Shekhar's *The Adivasi Will Not Dance*, situating it within the broader discourse of postcolonial and indigenous struggles. Drawing upon theoretical insights from Bill Ashcroft's *Post-Colonial Transformation* and David Jefferess's *Postcolonial Resistance*, the study analyses how Mangal Murmu's refusal to dance before the President of India emerges as a profound act of cultural and political defiance. His protest challenges the commodification of Adivasi identity and the exploitation of indigenous resources under the guise of development. By referencing Arundhati Roy's critique of the New Economic Policy and the ongoing displacement of tribal communities in Jharkhand, the paper highlights the disparity between economic progress and the marginalisation of indigenous communities. It contextualises Murmu's speech as a form of non-violent resistance that exposes state complicity in corporate appropriation of Adivasi land. This resistance is rooted not only in cultural pride but also in class consciousness, echoing Marxist and Fanonian critiques of capitalist exploitation and colonial violence. The study also draws on Albert Camus's assertion that writers must serve truth and liberty, positioning Shekhar as a vital literary voice from the Santhal tribe who challenges systemic silencing of indigenous perspectives. It connects contemporary Adivasi movements, such as the Pathalgadi resistance, to historical uprisings like the Kol and Tamar rebellions, thereby framing resistance as a recurring principle in Adivasi politics. Finally, through a close reading of the titular story, this paper argues that literature serves as a site of resistance, enabling subaltern voices to reclaim narrative agency. *The Adivasi Will Not Dance* not only depicts protest—it enacts it, transforming the refusal to perform into a symbol of indigenous resilience, cultural dignity, and political awakening. As such, Shekhar's narrative becomes a clarion call for justice, equity, and the reimagining of postcolonial resistance.

Introduction

In her non-fiction *Walking with the Comrades*, Arundhati Roy expresses her concerns, ironically stating, 'The promoters of the New Economic Policy—who find it easy to say 'There is No Alternative'—should be asked to suggest an alternative Resistance Policy. A specific one, to these specific people, in this specific forest' (Roy 2011: 57). The tribal people of India, like other Indigenous communities worldwide, must formulate a resistance policy against 'capitalist modernity, which takes the colonial form in particular places and at particular times' (Ahmad 1995:7). Hansda Sowvendra Shekhar, an Adivasi voice from Jharkhand, in his fictional work *The Adivasi Will Not Dance*, narrates the protagonist Mangal Murmu's refusal to dance before the President of India during the foundation stone-laying ceremony for a thermal power

plant. This paper examines how Mangal Murmu and his troupe construct resistance against the oppressors, drawing upon Bill Ashcroft's theory of resistance as conceptualized in *Post-Colonial Transformation* (2001) and David Jefferess's perspective in *Postcolonial Resistance: Culture, Liberation, and Transformation* (2008). I will explore how the Santhal people's refusal to dance serves as a form of defiance against cultural exploitation and the appropriation of land and resources.

Jharkhand is rich in natural resources, yet it is often individuals from business communities, many of whom have migrated from other regions, who tend to benefit most from these resources. At the same time, local populations continue to face poverty and lack access to necessities. This uneven distribution of wealth has led to the continued marginalisation of the Adivasi communities. In contrast to the armed resistance seen among some tribal groups in the forests of Dandakaranya in Chhattisgarh—who use sophisticated weapons like INSAS, SLRs, and AK-47s to oppose socio-political oppression—Mangal Murmu, the protagonist in Shekhar's story, chooses a non-violent form of resistance. His speech on stage becomes a powerful act of defiance and a call for cultural and political transformation:

> Johar, Rashtrapati-babu. We are very proud and happy that you have come to our Santhal Pargana, and we are also very proud that we have been asked to sing and dance before you and welcome you to our place. 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 Adivasis. 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— (Shekhar 2015: 187).

Mangal Murmu's defiance challenges the Christian missionary education system that exploits Adivasi cultural identity, the greed of Hindus for Adivasi land, the inhumanity of coal companies that jeopardise their austere lives, and the economic exploitation by other communities.

Hansda Sowvendra Shekhar: A rebel Adivasi voice

Albert Camus once stated, '... the writer can win the heart of a living community that will justify him, on the one condition that he will accept to the limit of his abilities the two tasks that constitute the greatness of his craft: the service of truth and the service of liberty. Because his task is to unite the greatest possible number of people, his art must not compromise with lies and servitude, which, wherever they rule, breed solitude. Whatever our personal weaknesses may be, the nobility of our craft will always be rooted in two commitments, difficult to maintain: the refusal to lie about what one knows and the resistance to oppression' (Camus,1957). This assertion applies equally to Hansda Sowvendra Shekhar, a writer from the Santhal tribe of Jharkhand.

Shekhar is widely known for his fictional works, including *The Mysterious Ailment of Rupi Baskey*, *The Adivasi Will Not Dance*, and *Jwala Kumar and the Gift of Fire*, as well as translations of Santali and Hindi prose and poetry into English. Among these,

The Adivasi Will Not Dance, a collection of stories, has garnered both literary acclaim and political controversy. Shortlisted for *The Hindu Prize* in 2016, it was simultaneously banned until 2017, leading to Shekhar's suspension from his job as a doctor until 2018. The title story exemplifies Camus' two commitments—the refusal to lie and the resistance to oppression.

Shekhar meticulously narrates the reality of the Adivasi people in Jharkhand. Mangal Murmu, the protagonist, raises his voice against the capitalist conspiracy that has led to the appropriation of tribal land for a thermal power plant without fair compensation or rehabilitation. The same marginalised people are then invited to perform at the inaugural ceremony to please the Honorable President of India, as their dance is considered an integral part of Jharkhand's culture. As a literary artist, Shekhar amplifies his community's voice through his narratives. As Robin S. Ngangom asserts, '... the writer must fight to tell the truth he knows; it is the lifeblood of his heart'. (Ngangom 2005: 173).

The second commitment is resistance against oppression. Kantilal Bhuria and Vikranta Bhuria, in their joint article, 'The Question of Integration', argue: 'Adivasi lands have been subjected to ''developmental terrorism'' by diverting them to large corporations for projects such as mining' (Bhuria and Bhuria 2021: 54). In Jharkhand, Adivasi lands are increasingly handed over to corporations for large-scale projects under the guise of development, displacing indigenous communities from the only property they have gained through generations of labour. Despite constitutional provisions to protect their land, both the Union and the State governments facilitate corporate appropriation without Adivasi consent. Vijoo Krishnan, in his article, 'Against the Violence of Development', notes:

> Massive infrastructure projects, industrial corridors, mining, captive ports, and irrigation and real estate projects involve en masse eviction of the peasantry, tribal people, forest dwellers, the fishing community, and marginalized sections already living in precarious conditions. The loot of resources is being facilitated by the abrogation of hard-won land rights, and all principles of justice are being thrown to the winds as even basic relocation with effective rehabilitation and resettlement provisions is glaringly absent (Krishnan 2018: 23-29).

What should a writer do when standing amid such systemic violence? Should they not use art, which inherently serves liberty, to resist oppression? The answer is clear: yes, a writer must tell the truth to sustain their community. This paper examines this concept of a 'Resistance Policy'—not one chosen by any political party or government, but a principle that all tribals, whether workers, peasants, or intellectuals, must learn to articulate their grievances and engage in agitation politics against their oppressors.

Land and resistance

For Indigenous communities worldwide, land is more than just territory—it is their lifeblood, deeply intertwined with their identity and survival. Their connection to the land stems from the labour they invest in cultivating it, fostering a profound sense of belonging. As Verrier Elwin in his book *A Philosophy for NEFA* has mentioned the comment of W.J. Culshaw:

> The most powerful motive in Santal life is possession of the land which they till. Land belongs to those by whom the original clearings in the forest were made and passes through the male line to their descendants—remaining always within the same clan. The Santal village officials received special lands as recognition of their services and of their office. No motive is so strong in a tribal people as the preservation of the life of the tribe and its mores, albeit the motive works for the most part at the unconscious level. A Santal's land not only provides economic security but is a powerful link with his ancestors, and this applies to newly-entered areas no less than the old, for he will not take possession till the spirits approve. The land is a part of his spiritual as well as his economic heritage. Hunger drove the Santals to despair, but their attachment to the land provided also an emotional basis without which the rebellion might not have taken place (Elwin 1957: 15).

This deep-rooted bond with the land was not merely sentimental but also a source of resistance. To safeguard their rights and preserve their ancestral connections, the Santals and other tribal communities rose in defiance against British rule and exploitative native landlords. Their uprisings were not merely acts of defiance but powerful assertions of their inherent right to their land, culture, and way of life. The Kol insurrection of 1831-32, for instance, was a direct response to the encroachment on tribal lands. Similarly, the Tamar rebellions, which erupted seven times between 1789 and 1832, were fuelled by the persistent and unlawful dispossession of land that the Hos, Mundas, and Uraons endured. In recent times, the Pathalgadi movement[1] and All India Kishan Sabha are fighting for autonomy and are representative of modern-day Adivasi politics and class-based Adivasi politics, respectively. However, these various forms of resistance, while important expressions of dissent, often do not articulate a clear and unified ideological or theoretical vision—such as a long-term political, economic, or cultural strategy—that can challenge and replace the deeply rooted structures of exploitation, displacement, and state control. As a result, they fall short of initiating the kind of systemic transformation necessary for achieving lasting autonomy and genuine liberation for Adivasi communities.

Resistance as a principle of literature

Selwyn Cudjoe, a Trinidadian academic and scholar, in his seminal work *Resistance and Caribbean Literature*, defines resistance as 'an act or complex of acts designed to rid a people of its oppressors, be they slave masters or multi-national corporations'. He also explores the deep connection between literature and politics, asserting:

> In literature, caught up in the struggle, words must be like bullets: sharp, straight-shooting and to the mark. To miss is literally to lose one's life in the

[1] Anjana Singh, in her article 'Many Faces of the Pathalgadi Movement in Jharkhand', states that the Pathalgadi movement has evolved into a powerful expression of Adivasi identity, rooted in customary practices. More than a cultural assertion, it critically challenges dominant notions of governmentality and mainstream development. By foregrounding the gram sabha as a legitimate and autonomous institution of village governance, the movement promotes an alternative model of meaningful empowerment. It stands as a multifaceted resistance with political, ethnic, and ecological dimensions (Singh 2019).

> process. With the crushing urgency of the revolution, literature becomes functional in that it has a very real task to perform (Cudjoe 1980: 64).

In a state like Jharkhand, where Adivasi struggle to protect ancestral lands that have persisted for generations, literature plays a crucial role in organised resistance. The relevance of resistance literature is further examined by Bill Ashcroft in *Post-Colonial Transformation*, where he states:

> The conceptual problems which complicate the potential of resistance literature (and resistance in literature) to develop and transform itself, stem entirely from the defensively oppositional agenda in which notions of resistance find themselves. Such an agenda inevitably privileges a construction of culture, that is, the culture of the 'masses', as 'pure', as distinct from what Cudjoe calls the 'cultural renaissance' undertaken by intellectual élites (Ashcroft 2001: 29).

While the mainstream writers actively supported the national struggle for liberation from colonial rule, the aftermath of independence saw capitalism replacing colonial oppression. The marginalised tribals, instead of benefiting from freedom, became victims of new economic structures. The anti-colonial movement failed to bring these communities economic, social, and cultural progress. In response, writers from marginalised backgrounds now construct a literature of resistance, seeking justice for their people. The need for this resistance policy in the postcolonial literature emerges due to the failure of national liberation to bring humanistic liberation as imagined by writers like Edward Said. Said, in his work *Culture and Imperialism*, writes:

> The post-imperial writers of the Third World…bear their past within them- as scars of humiliating wounds, as instigation for different practices, as potentially revised visions of the past tending toward a post-colonial future, as urgently reinterpretable and redeployable experiences, in which the formerly silent native speaks and acts on territory reclaimed as part of a general movement of resistance, from the colonist (Said 194: 212).

Writers like Hansdwa Sowvendra Shekhar are born as 'new souls' to give voice to the marginalised people from the clutches of capitalists in an independent nation like India and the democratisation of Adivasi consciousness. Archana Prasad, in her article 'Class Struggle and the Future of Adivasi Politics', proposes:

> The dynamics of class-based organizations entailed the democratization of the Adivasi consciousness, and these could be distinguished from other Adivasi struggles. Many struggles in Adivasi regions were embedded in movements for social transformation and which sought social, economic and political emancipation (Prasad 2021: 73).

Resistance as a form of class consciousness

Mangal Murmu's defiance in *The Adivasi Will Not Dance* epitomises the essence of class awareness as conceptualised by Karl Marx. His refusal to perform before the President of India transcends personal dissent, serving as a collective declaration of Adivasi identity against systemic subjugation. In this pivotal moment of resistance, Murmu exposes the fundamental conflict between Adivasi cultural heritage and the capitalist machinery that exploits their land and labour for economic gain. His impassioned words, 'Unless we are given back our homes and land, we will not sing

and dance. We Adivasis will not dance. The Adivasi will not—' (Shekhar 2015:187) leave an unfinished thought, symbolising an ongoing struggle that persists in contemporary debates.

This act of defiance is firmly rooted in a historical materialist perspective, wherein the subjugated class—Adivasis—acknowledges their positioning within exploitative power structures. Murmu's refusal to dance is a rejection of the commodification of Adivasi culture, which is often showcased as an exotic spectacle while the community's harsh socio-economic realities remain unaddressed. His protest aligns with Frantz Fanon's concept of 'aggressive patterns of conduct' as outlined in *The Wretched of the Earth: '*Colonial exploitation, poverty, and endemic famine drive the native more and more to open, organised revolt' (Fanon 1963: 238).

Moreover, Shekhar's narrative critiques the role of the state in perpetuating economic marginalisation under the pretext of development. The proposed power plant, portrayed as a symbol of progress, is not for those who provide the land for investment, but for the capitalists. This echoes Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak's concept of 'epistemic violence' in *Can the Subaltern Speak?* highlighting the silencing of indigenous perspectives in dominant discourses of modernity.

> Put in the abstractions of capital logic, in the wake of industrial capitalism and mercantile conquest, a group of countries, generally first-world, were in the position of investing capital; another group, generally third-world, provided the field for investment, both through the subordinate indigenous capitalists and through their ill-protected and shifting labor force. In the interest of maintaining the circulation and growth of industrial capital (and of the concomitant task of administration within nineteenth-century territorial imperialism), transportation, law, and standardized education systems were developed—even as local industries were destroyed or restructured, land distribution was rearranged, and raw material was transferred to the colonizing country. With so-called decolonization, the growth of multinational capital, and the relief of the administrative charge, "development" did not now involve wholesale state-level legislation and establishing education systems in a comparable way. This impedes the growth of consumerism in the former colonies (Spivak 2010: 42).

Murmu's assertion, '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' (Shekhar 2015:187), exposes the deceptive language of development that masks large-scale displacement and exploitation.

Shekhar's work aligns with the broader canon of resistance literature, where marginalised voices reclaim narrative agency to confront entrenched power structures. The simple yet powerful act of refusal—of not dancing—becomes a form of protest that extends beyond the immediate story, contributing to the larger discourse of Adivasi self-determination. In this way, *The Adivasi Will Not Dance* does not merely depict resistance but actively participates in it, compelling readers to engage with the lived struggles of the Adivasi community.

Conclusion

Ultimately, Mangal Murmu's defiance underscores the emergence of class consciousness among Adivasis, encouraging them to recognize their collective strength in opposing systemic injustice. His protest challenges conventional notions of resistance, which often equate rebellion with armed conflict, demonstrating instead that even the refusal to partake in cultural performances can serve as a powerful political statement. As history has shown, such acts of defiance lay the groundwork for broader movements, positioning *The Adivasi Will Not Dance* as a critical text in understanding postcolonial resistance and the assertion of indigenous identity.

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