

# A Critical Study of Indigeneity, Gender Inequity, and the Lingering Echoes of Psychological Trauma in *The Mysterious Ailment of Rupi Baskey*

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## Abstract

*The article explores Hansda Sowvendra Shekhar's novel "The Mysterious Ailment of Rupi Baskey" as a reflection on indigeneity, gender disparity, and psychological trauma faced by santhal tribal women in India. The novel reflects the cumulative impact of systemic marginalization. The novel also highlights the lack of understanding and support for mental health within the community. The novel's protagonist Rupi Representativeness the multifaceted challenges faced by Adivasi women who often fail to notice in dominant discourses due to their unique form of marginalization. These women are positioned at the margins of both gender and ethnicity. Their struggles are informed by a history of colonial exploitation, continued systemic neglect, and the imposition of mainstream cultural values that disregard Indigenous traditions and knowledge systems. The novel examines the connection between Adidas women and their cultural roots highlighting various tensions. The article examines the systemic injustices that sustain the suffering of Indigenous communities. It emphasizes how crucial storytelling is to elevating under-represented voices and comprehending their perspectives. The Mysterious Ailment of Rupi Baskey draws attention to the hardships faced by Adivasi women and suggests social change in order to attain justice and equity.*

**Keywords:** Indigeneity, Genderdisparity, Adivasiwomen, Trauma, Marginalisation

## Introduction

"There's really no such thing as the 'voiceless'. There are only the deliberately silenced, or the preferably unheard".-Arundhati Roy

Adivasis are the Indigenous communities of India and are considered as the earliest inhabitants of the Indian subcontinent. They have a deep connection with nature and they rely on forests and natural resources for their livelihood. Adivasis face systemic marginalization and various challenges in contemporary India. The term "Adivasi" translates to "original inhabitants" and encompasses a wide variety of tribes, each with its own unique identity. Adivasi's

encompasses of different groups such as the Santhals, Gonds, Bhils, and many more. They are primarily settled in remote areas often in forests, hills, and other ecologically sensitive regions. Their Traditional practices are passed down through generations and which include farming, hunting, gathering, and crafts. Land dispossession is one of the pressing issues for Adivasis. Most of their territories were taken over during colonial rule and later by modern state policies. This displacement has disrupted their way of life, pushing many into poverty and forcing them to migrate to urban centers as laborers. Adivasis also face social exclusion and discrimination. They are often being viewed as “backward” or “primitive” by mainstream society. Stereotyping like this keeps disparities in access to jobs, healthcare, and education. Their problems have been made worse by insufficient government action and the execution of social programs. In Adivasi communities, women experience ethnic and gender marginalisation, frequently remain disconnected from decision-making processes, and carry the brunt of poverty, household duties, and restricted access to resources.

The Santhal tribe is one of the largest indigenous communities in India, and are scattered in the areas of Jharkhand, West Bengal, Odisha, Bihar, Assam, and Bangladesh. They have a diverse cultural heritage with their own language, Santhali, belonging to the Austro-Asiatic language family. Santhals follow a patrilineal social system organized into clans called “parhans” and governed by a council of elders called “Manjhis”. Santhal women have been a target of exploitation in their community as well as in the mainstream society. The author’s portrayal of women in his novel is unconventional presenting them as lively and dynamic despite their socio-economic background. Hansda presents different types of women which include one who flies the norms of patriarchy and the other who adapts to it.

Santhal tribal women encounter several problems arising from their gender and tribal identity. Even though the Santhals are one of India’s major Adivasi communities with a significant cultural history, the Santhal women frequently experience both systemic and societal discrimination. The challenges of Santhal women are entrenched in historical, economic, and social conditions. Tribal women in India suffer a lot of challenges which includes social isolation, economic exploitation, and land displacement. The Santhal women also experience discrimination from the general population which frequently sees them through a prism of cultural superiority. Tribal women’s voices are becoming more and more prominent in Indian writing and it frequently addresses the double burden of gender and ethnic marginalisation.

### **An Analysis of Identity, Gender Disparity and Trauma in the Select Narrative**

Hansda Sowvendra Shekhar’s novel “The Mysterious Ailment of Rupi Baskey” examines the complexities of indigeneity, gender, and psychological trauma in the Adivasi community. The novel also reveals the struggles of marginalized indigenous women and highlight the impact of patriarchy, superstition, and communal expectations. The novel highlights the Santhal tribe’s traditions, rituals, and socio-political realities. The novel portrays Rupi Baskey’s life as an example of Adivasi women’s struggles to preserve cultural identity while directing systemic oppression. The narrative portrays the Santhal way of life which includes festivals, agricultural practices, and belief systems.

‘Rupi’, the protagonist of the novel known for her indigenous knowledge and is described as a custodian of the forest’s secrets and the earth’s rhythms. It is mentioned in the novel that she is a perfect example of tribal identity and nature. This connection also becomes vulnerable as modernity and external influences disrupt the community’s traditional way of life. The novel also portrays gender disparity through the protagonist Rupi and her experiences reflect the patriarchal structures in the Santhal community. Rupi faces societal expectations from a young age and that define her

worth as a daughter, wife, and mother. Her marriage to Khorda Baskey make her condition even more worse. Rupi's decline reveals the oppressive impact of gender-based expectations with her mysterious ailment illustrating the cumulative effects of such oppression. It is quoted in the text that "Rupi carried not just her own pain but the unspoken anguish of generations of women who had silently endured".

The way the community responded to Rupi's illness shows how unequal men and women are treated in the community. They blamed her sickness on witchcraft, which is a common way to target women who don't follow social norms. This shows how traditional beliefs can keep women in violence while protecting cultural integrity. Using Rupi Baskey's life as a lens to analyse the entrenched patriarchy in the Santhal community, the novel portrays how societal and familial expectations restrict women. As Rupi's ailment progresses in the course of time, her inability to fulfill prescribed roles particularly as a wife and mother becomes a source of both personal and communal anguish. The responses of others around her can be seen as a sign of empathy or a challenge to the established social order.

The text quotes this collective perception as "Her sickness was seen as a flaw in her womanhood and a failure to embody the strength expected of Santhal women." This statement exposes the dehumanizing impact of rigid gender roles which reduce women to their perceived utility within the household and community and also ignoring their individuality and well-being. The community's response to Rupi's plight rooted in superstition and gendered biases which also demonstrates how traditional beliefs are weaponized against women who deviate from societal norms. Labeling her as a potential witch serves to isolate and stigmatize her fortifying the patriarchal structures that oppress women under the guise of cultural preservation. The novel highlights this violence when it states, "In their fear of what they could not understand, they placed the blame on Rupi, turning her pain into a curse upon the community." The narrative explores how cultural traditions despite their significance in identity and belonging can also serve as tools of control and subjugation.

The novel portrays Rupi's psychological trauma through her mysterious ailment and which is linked to her emotional and mental distress. It highlights the complexity of trauma as an individual and collective phenomenon. Rupi's struggles are intensified by the lack of understanding and support from her community who rely on supernatural explanations to address her distress. As quoted in the text, it states that "Her cries were drowned out by the chants and rituals, as if her pain could be exorcised like a demon". This shows the alienation and helplessness experienced by women like Rupi whose suffering is dismissed or misunderstood. The novel also analyses the intergenerational impact of trauma highlighting the experiences of Rupi. Rupi's psychological trauma stems from her personal loss particularly with the death of her child. The novel describes that her grief is heightened by the absence of emotional support from her community and leads her to the feeling of isolation and hopelessness. The loss of her child deepens her anguish and intensifies her feelings of hopelessness. The protagonist's struggle to find solace within her community highlights the difficulties faced by individuals in similar situations where societal norms often discourage open discussions about grief and mental health.

Superstitions also played a significant role in affecting Rupi's life which also leads her to suffering and ostracization. Her illness is viewed as witchcraft causing her to feel like an outcast. The novel highlights this stigma where children being told not to approach her and women whispering behind her. This treatment isolates Rupi and strengthens her feelings of helplessness. The community's rejection hinders her emotional healing as she is constantly reminded of her perceived otherness.

Rupi's personal experiences in the novel reflect the broader struggles faced by her community which includes poverty, discrimination, and loss of traditional ways of life. These hardships make

individuals like Rupi more vulnerable to trauma which also symbolise the shared pain of the community. The novel highlights the interconnectedness of personal and collective experiences which highlight the need for more understanding and support for marginalized communities. The novel highlights the cyclical nature of trauma in marginalized communities where individual suffering is a reflection of collective distress. Rupi's personal grief and isolation highlight the Santhal community's vulnerabilities, systemic inequities, cultural erosion, and socio-economic hardships, relying on superstition and traditional practices. The novel appeals for a more compassionate and systematic approach to healing by acknowledging both tangible and intangible scars borne by individuals like Rupi.

## Conclusion

The novel *Mysterious Ailment of Rupi Baskey* by Hansda Sowvendra Shekhar's is a clear investigation of the connection between indigeneity, gender, and psychological trauma through the protagonist of the novel. The novel uses Rupi Baskey as a microcosm to reflect the broader struggles of the Santhal community which include displacement, poverty, and cultural erosion. The novel highlights the difficulties faced by Santhal women such as their dual marginalization as members of a tribal community and as women subjected to patriarchal norms. The novel also highlights the role of grief and loss in shaping psychological trauma. Rupi's experience sheds attention on how social pressures can lead to personal tragedies like rejection and child loss. And her inability to find solace within her community shows that there is a need for more compassionate and equitable approaches which addresses the mental health well being in marginalized communities. The novel underline the interconnectedness of personal and collective struggles by highlighting the vulnerability of individuals like Rupi to psychological distress in a broader context.

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