

Disease, Stigma and Cultural Politics: Reading *The Mysterious Ailment of Rupī Baskey* as Social Metaphor

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Abstract : Sowvendra Shekhar Hansda's novel *The Mysterious Ailment of Rupī Baskey* (2013) foregrounds the struggles of the Santhal community through the haunting figure of Rupī, whose inexplicable illness becomes more than a bodily affliction. The novel uses Rupī's sickness or ailment as a powerful social metaphor to interrogate the intersections of disease, stigma, and cultural politics within a marginalized tribal society. This paper argues that Rupī Baskey's sickness is less a bio-medical condition and more an embodiment of the cultural anxieties, social hierarchies, and gendered oppressions that mark Santhal life in Jharkhand, India. Through the narrative of Rupī Baskey's decline, Hansda Sowvendra Shekhar critiques the patriarchal structures that confine tribal women, exposes the clash between indigenous healing practices and modern medicine, and reveals how superstition and communal belief systems often reinforce stigma rather than alleviate suffering. Drawing on frameworks of medical humanities and subaltern studies, this study situates Rupī Baskey's 'mysterious ailment' as symbolic of the wider socio-political malaise that afflicts tribal communities—dispossession from land, erosion of cultural traditions, and marginalization within mainstream Indian society. The novel's fusion of magical realism, oral lore, and social realism further deepens the metaphorical resonance of disease as a marker of both vulnerability and resistance. By reading Rupī's suffering not only as personal tragedy but also as a communal narrative—Santhal, the paper highlights how Hansda redefines illness as a cultural and political phenomenon. Ultimately, *The Mysterious Ailment of Rupī Baskey* demonstrates that the body, particularly the body of a tribal woman, becomes a contested site where history, politics, and culture inscribe their wounds.

Keywords : Tribal literature; Santhal community; disease and stigma; cultural politics; medical humanities; subaltern studies.

Introduction : In the growing body of Indian English literature, Hansda Sowvendra Shekhar has emerged as one of the most significant voices of

the twenty-first century, particularly for his role in bringing tribal narratives to the forefront of contemporary discourse in India. Belonging to the Santhal community of Jharkhand, Hansda writes with an insider's sensitivity and authenticity, weaving together "the lived realities, oral traditions, and cultural politics of indigenous life of Santhals" (Chakraborty 2). His fiction occupies a rare position in Indian writing in English it simultaneously speaks to the mainstream while "staying rooted in the specificities of Santhal worldview" (Hansda iv). Through his short stories and novels, Hansda has sought to counter the silencing of tribal experiences in the Indian literary and cultural imagination. His writings challenge stereotypes of tribal people as merely primitive, exotic, or peripheral. Instead, he presents them as organic beings with complex individuals negotiating the tensions of modernity, identity, and survival. Hansda's debut novel, *The Mysterious Ailment of Rupi Baskey* (2013), is a landmark text in this respect. Shortlisted for the Hindu Literary Prize, the novel explores the life of Rupi, an organic Santhal woman whose "inexplicable and incurable illness becomes the central thread of the narrative" (iii). On the surface, the novel appears to recount the tragic decline of a once-vibrant more able woman and the consequent despair of her family. Yet, a closer reading reveals that Rupi's ailment is far more than a personal tragedy. It functions as a metaphor for the multiple afflictions – cultural, political, and gendered – that confront the Santhal community. The narrative blends oral storytelling, magical realism, and social realism, crafting a story where disease is not merely biological but deeply enmeshed with questions of belief, stigma, and power in Santhal lifestyle.

The "mystery" of Rupi's illness lies in its resistance to conventional explanation. Neither indigenous healers nor modern biomedical practitioners succeed in curing her illness :

Look! My wife's health is no one's business. She was sick and I took her to a doctor. I did not take her to an ojha, the way many of you would have done with your wives. I am not a fool like you all are.'

No one discussed the matter further with Sido. Once Khorda felt better, the couple returned to Nitra where Rupi once again became bedridden. (128).

This ambiguity compels readers to look beyond the biomedical paradigm of disease and explore the broader socio-cultural and political contexts that shape the understanding of illness. The novel thereby resonates with the insights of medical humanities, which stress that illness cannot be understood in isolation from the cultural and symbolic meanings attached to it. In the Santhal community of Jharkhand portrayed in the novel, disease becomes a narrative device that reveals underlying anxieties: the precariousness of women's lives in patriarchal structures, the persistence of superstition and communal stigma, and the broader marginalisation of tribal groups within the Indian nation-state. The problem that this paper addresses lies precisely in this intersection of the biological and the social. Hansda's novel insists that disease is not only a physical affliction but also a cultural metaphor – a way of speaking about collective trauma, dispossession, and vulnerability. Through Rupi's body, Hansda inscribes the anxieties of an entire community grappling with the pressures of tradition, patriarchy, and modernity. Her ailment, therefore, functions as a symbolic narrative that critiques the structures of power and belief shaping Santhal life. If read in this light, The novel provides certain critical insights into how tribal women's bodies become contested sites where history, culture, and politics converge. The central research questions guiding this inquiry are as follows:

1. How does Rupi Baskey's illness reflect the intersections of gender, stigma, and tribal culture?
2. In what ways does Hansda use the body as a site for negotiating power, belief, and identity?

These questions point toward a broader theoretical engagement with the body as a cultural and political text. Michel Foucault, in *Discipline and Punish* (1977), conceptualises the body "as a site upon which systems of discipline, surveillance, and power are inscribed". (41) Similarly, Susan Sontag, in *Illness as Metaphor* (1978), argues that illness often acquires symbolic meanings that extend beyond the medical realm, shaping social perceptions and cultural anxieties. Veena Das, through her studies of social suffering and everyday violence (1995; 2007), further demonstrates how pain and trauma become embedded within collective social life rather than remaining merely individual experiences. Within this framework, Rupi's illness exceeds the boundaries of personal affliction and emerges as a manifestation of communal and historical suffering. Her ailment symbolizes the anxieties, marginalization, and silenced trauma of the

Santhal community itself. In this sense, the novel resonates with Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak's notion of the "subaltern" (1988), whose voices and suffering are frequently rendered invisible, unheard, or unintelligible within dominant socio-cultural and epistemic structures. Therefore, The central argument of this paper is that Rupi's "mysterious ailment" should be read as a symbolic narrative that critiques patriarchal oppression in the community, cultural anxieties, and the marginalisation of tribal communities. The novel situates disease as both metaphor and lived reality, thereby illuminating the ways in which the Santhal community negotiates the tensions between indigenous knowledge and modern medicine, superstition and rationality, community and individuality. Through Rupi's body, Hansda foregrounds how power operates – how poor women bear the brunt of social stigma, how traditional healing practices reflect both cultural resilience and limitations, and how the community's struggle for dignity is inscribed on vulnerable bodies. By interrogating the cultural politics of disease and stigma, this study seeks to contribute to broader conversations in postcolonial studies, medical humanities, and indigenous literature of India. It demonstrates how tribal writing, far from being a marginal sub-genre, engages with central questions of identity, resistance, and survival. *The Mysterious Ailment of Rupi Baskey* is, therefore, not only a story of one woman's suffering but also a narrative of a community's negotiation with forces that threaten its continuity. To read Rupi's ailment as a social metaphor is to recognise how literature gives voice to silenced histories and exposes the deep entanglement of body, culture and politics in tribal contexts.

Review of Literature: The body of scholarship on Hansda Sowvendra Shekhar's works, Indian tribal literature, and broader studies on disease and cultural politics provides valuable points of entry for interpreting the novel, *The Mysterious Ailment of Rupi Baskey*. However, few studies have directly addressed Rupi's illness as a cultural-political metaphor. This review situates the present study within four intersecting domains of scholarship - criticism on Hansda's writings and tribal literature in India; theories of disease as metaphor; analyses of stigma, cultural politics, and subalternity; and the research gap that this paper seeks to address.

1. Criticism on Hansda Sowvendra Shekhar's Works and Tribal Literature in India - Hansda has been recognised as one of the foremost literary voices representing Santhal tribal life in Indian English literature. His debut novel, *The Mysterious Ailment of Rupi Baskey* (2013) has

received attention for its portrayal of Santhal traditions, practices, gender relations, and the blending of oral-lore with contemporary narrative techniques. Critics have observed that Hansda Sowvendra Shekhar's fiction resists stereotypical representations of tribal communities by foregrounding their resilience, cultural agency, and social complexity rather than portraying them merely as passive victims of marginalisation (Chakraborty, 2019). More broadly, Indian tribal literature in English has attracted increasing scholarly attention for its rootedness in oral traditions, indigenous epistemologies, and performative cultural practices. Ganesh Devy (1992) argues that tribal narratives emerge from rich oral cultures that challenge the dominance of written literary traditions, while scholars such as Pradeep Mahanand (2005) view tribal writing as a significant counter-discourse to mainstream literary and cultural representations. Collectively, these critical interventions establish tribal literature as a distinct and evolving field of study. However, much of the existing scholarship has primarily focused on identity, marginalisation, and representation, leaving the symbolic and metaphorical dimensions of illness, suffering, and corporeality relatively underexplored in texts such as *The Mysterious Ailment* of Rupī Baskey.

2. Disease as Metaphor - The idea that illness functions as metaphor is most famously articulated by Susan Sontag in *Illness as Metaphor* (1978). Sontag argues that “diseases such as tuberculosis and cancer have historically been imbued with symbolic meanings that extend beyond their biomedical reality” (5). Her insights into how illness is culturally constructed remain foundational for reading Rupī's ailment as more than a medical condition. However, Sontag also warns against “the dangers of over-metaphorising disease, which can reinforce stigma” (87). Arthur Kleinman's *The Illness Narratives* (1988) extends this argument by distinguishing between “disease” (biomedical pathology) and “illness” (the personal and cultural experience of being unwell), emphasising that “illness narratives reveal the social and moral dimensions of suffering” (Kleinman 3). In the context of Hansda's novel, Kleinman's framework helps us understand how Rupī's illness becomes embedded in Santhal belief systems, family structures and communal anxieties.

3. Stigma, Cultural Politics, and Subalternity - Illness is not only a personal experience but also a site where cultural politics and stigma are enacted. Michel Foucault's *The Birth of the Clinic* (1994) traces “how modern medicine transformed the body into an object of knowledge and

surveillance” (Foucault 34). For Foucault, the body becomes a locus where power and discipline are exercised; this lens is useful to understand how Rupi’s body is scrutinised, controlled and interpreted within competing systems of knowledge (indigenous healing, superstition, and modern medicine). Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak’s essay “Can the Subaltern Speak?” (1988) foregrounds “the silenced position of marginalised groups, particularly women, in dominant discourses” (285). Her insights resonate with Rupi’s predicament: her body speaks volumes about communal anxieties, yet her voice remains unheard, mediated through cultural narratives of curse which come from generations, impurity and victimhood. Anthropologist Veena Das in *Critical Events* (1995) explores, “how illness and suffering are shaped by social, political and cultural contexts; Das argues that illness can become a means through which societies articulate trauma and crisis” (137). Rupi’s ailment, when read through Das’s lens, emerges as a cultural expression of Santhal marginalisation and the unresolved tensions between tradition and modernity.

Despite these significant theoretical frameworks, there remains a relative paucity of criticism that directly interprets Rupi’s ailment as a cultural-political metaphor. While scholars such as Chakraborty (2019) and Hembrom (2022) have commented on Hansda’s blending of realism and myth, their focus tends to be on narrative style and cultural representation rather than the metaphorical significance of illness. Similarly, broader studies of tribal literature have highlighted issues of identity, resistance and oral tradition (Devy, 1992; Mahanand, 2005), but the symbolic function of disease and stigma in such texts has not been sufficiently explored. This gap becomes especially significant because *The Mysterious Ailment of Rupi Baskey* is a novel where illness cannot be separated from questions of gender, power and cultural politics. Rupi’s sickness is not simply a medical mystery but a metaphor for the vulnerabilities of tribal women and the larger socio-political afflictions faced by the Santhal community. By situating the novel within the frameworks of medical humanities, subaltern studies, and feminist criticism, this paper seeks to address this critical lacuna.

Rupi’s Ailment as Cultural Metaphor - At the centre of Hansda Sowvendra Shekhar’s *The Mysterious Ailment of Rupi Baskey* (2013) lies the enigma of Rupi’s illness—an undiagnosed condition that defies both indigenous healers and modern medicine. This deliberate ambiguity

shifts attention from pathology to meaning: the ailment becomes less a medical condition than a symbolic narrative. As Sontag (1978) observes, illnesses are “metaphors through which societies express their deepest anxieties” (5). Rupi’s wasting body embodies precisely this metaphorical turn: her decline mirrors the Santhal community’s collective experience of dispossession, cultural dislocation, and social vulnerability. Within the novel, disease transcends the private sphere to signify the precarious survival of a marginalised people. The Santhal community interprets Rupi’s sickness as a curse or spiritual imbalance, yet these beliefs index deeper material realities—poverty, loss of land, and limited healthcare access (Chakraborty 2019). Hansda’s portrayal thus aligns with Kleinman’s (1988) distinction between “disease” and “illness,” foregrounding how cultural interpretation shapes suffering (3). Through Rupi’s body, the novel translates the social trauma of marginalisation into the language of ailment.

Stigma and Gendered Oppression - Rupi’s affliction also exposes how illness becomes gendered. Within patriarchal tribal structures, her sickness is interpreted as weakness, impurity, or divine punishment—echoing Veena Das’s (1995) insight that “suffering is socially inscribed through cultural codes” (139). Gossip and suspicion transform Rupi’s condition into a moral spectacle, reinforcing patriarchal ideologies that conflate womanhood with transgression. Her double marginalisation—“both as woman and as tribal subject—echoes Spivak’s (1988) question, *Can the Subaltern Speak?*” (285). Rupi’s body “speaks” through its pain but remains unheard within both her community and the national imaginary. Her experience exemplifies “what Rege (2006) calls the ‘gendered subalternity’ of marginalised women” (112), whose suffering becomes emblematic of collective distress yet whose voices remain suppressed. In this sense, Rupi’s illness reveals how stigma and patriarchy intersect to police the female body, turning sickness into a social judgment rather than a condition of care.

Indigenous Healing and Modern Medicine - Hansda stages a complex dialogue between Santhal healing traditions and biomedical rationality. The ojha’s rituals, incantations, and communal participation coexist uneasily with the doctor’s prescriptions and diagnosis. Neither system cures Rupi, suggesting that the problem lies not in the efficacy of medicine but in the epistemological rift between cultural worlds. Kleinman (1988) reminds us that healing practices are embedded within “local moral

worlds” (3), where treatment derives meaning from social relationships rather than medical accuracy. The novel’s juxtaposition of dahni-bidya (witchcraft) and hospital medicine reflects a broader negotiation between tradition and modernity. The failure of both underscores the insufficiency of purely biomedical frameworks to address culturally mediated suffering. As Chakraborty (2019) observes, “Hansda’s narrative ‘blends the magical with the real’ to question the authority of dominant epistemologies” (7). Rupi’s incurability thus symbolises the crisis of knowledge faced by indigenous communities navigating the boundaries of belief and science.

Communal Belief and Cultural Politics - Rupi’s illness reverberates through the collective consciousness of her village. Every rumour, ritual, and prayer binds the community into the narrative of her decline. Illness here functions, as Das (1995) suggests, as a “language of crisis” (141) a way for societies to articulate trauma when conventional discourse fails. The Santhals’ interpretations of her disease as curse, moral failing, divine retribution-serve as allegories of their historical disempowerment. The community’s response to Rupi’s ailment, therefore, is not simply superstition but an act of cultural self-definition amid marginalisation. Her body becomes a screen upon which fears of land loss, cultural erosion, and social fragmentation are projected. The ailment’s mystery mirrors the opacity of the community’s own predicament-caught between visibility and erasure within the national imagination. Through Rupi, Hansda transforms bodily suffering into a discourse of collective identity and resistance.

The Body as Text - The culmination of Hansda’s critique lies in his portrayal of the body as a palimpsest of intersecting discourses. Foucault’s notion of the “medical gaze” (36) elucidates how Rupi’s body becomes an object of observation and control, its meaning constructed by healers, relatives, and physicians alike. Her corporeal suffering is, as Butler (1993) argues, performatively reproduced through language and social ritual- “the reiteration of norms that constitute the body’s intelligibility” (15). Rupi’s body thus becomes a text written by multiple hands: the indigenous cosmology that invokes curses, the patriarchal ideology that demands purity, and the biomedical discourse that seeks diagnosis. This intertextual body simultaneously registers vulnerability and resistance. As Rege (2006) and Spivak (1988) note, the subaltern female body often carries the symbolic burden of community honour and violation. Hansda transforms this trope into critique-his narrative exposes

how such inscriptions of power, belief, and stigma reproduce systemic inequality.

Discussion: This discussion situates Hansda Sowvendra Shekhar's *The Mysterious Ailment of Rupi Baskey* (2013) within the intersecting frameworks of medical humanities, subaltern studies, and feminist-tribal criticism. The novel demonstrates how disease, when mediated through literature, functions as a metaphor for collective trauma rather than a purely individual affliction. Rupi's unexplained and incurable illness-resistant to both biomedicine and indigenous healing-transcends the realm of physiology to become, as Sontag (1978) describes, "a metaphorical vehicle for expressing cultural fears and moral anxieties" (5). In Hansda's reimagining, however, this metaphor is transformed into an act of social critique: Rupi's diseased body encapsulates the Santhal community's anxieties surrounding poverty, dispossession, superstition, and eroding cultural sovereignty. Her ailment thereby transforms into what Veena Das (1995) calls a "language of crisis" through which collective trauma finds articulation (137). The implications of this reading are far-reaching for the study of tribal and indigenous literature. Tribal narratives in English have often been marginalised, dismissed as ethnographic curiosities or aestheticized folklore Devy (1992). Hansda's novel disrupts these reductive frameworks by merging oral tradition, magical realism, and social realism to produce a politically charged narrative of survival. As Devy (1992) observes, indigenous writing in India operates as a "counter-discourse to hegemonic cultural narratives" (xvii), and Hansda extends this tradition by locating the Santhal female body at the intersection of identity, belief, and resistance. The mysterious ailment thus becomes more than a narrative device-it embodies the precarious existence of the Santhal community within the broader Indian nation-state, exposing the layered injustices of both social neglect and epistemic erasure.

Moreover, Hansda's centring of the tribal female body constitutes a powerful intervention in gender discourse. Mainstream Indian fiction has long portrayed indigenous women as either passive victims or exoticized symbols of purity and nature (Rege, 2006). In contrast, Rupi's suffering is rendered with psychological depth and political awareness, compelling readers to confront the intersection of patriarchy and cultural marginalisation. Her illness-interpreted as curse, weakness, or moral failing-reflects the social inscription of suffering described by Das (1995), while simultaneously embodying what Spivak (1988) terms the "silenced

subaltern” (285). Hansda’s refusal to offer closure-Rupi remains incurable-becomes a deliberate narrative strategy that resists the redemptive logic of healing, thereby foregrounding the persistence of structural inequality and gendered oppression. In this refusal lies the novel’s radical gesture: the tribal woman’s body ceases to be an object of pity and becomes instead a site of critique, exposing how both internal patriarchy and external colonial modernity conspire to silence subaltern voices (Foucault, 1994; Butler, 1993).

A comparative framework reveals that Hansda’s engagement with illness and marginality resonates with other subaltern and indigenous literatures. As in Omprakash Valmiki’s *Joothan* (1997), the polluted Dalit body becomes a metaphor for systemic caste oppression, mirroring Rupī’s stigmatized condition within Santhal society. Mahasweta Devi’s “Draupadi” (1978) similarly deploys the violated tribal female body as a political text of resistance against state violence. Beyond the Indian context, Leslie Marmon Silko’s *Ceremony* (1977) in Native American literature presents illness and healing rituals as metaphors for cultural endurance amid colonial trauma. As PK Nayar (2018) argues, “the diseased or wounded body in postcolonial writing often becomes a trope for the nation’s own fractured self” (22). These parallels underscore that illness, stigma, and the body are not merely private experiences but powerful metaphors through which marginalised communities articulate histories of survival and protest.

In this light, *The Mysterious Ailment of Rupī Baskey* participates in a transnational corpus of subaltern narratives where corporeality becomes a site of historical inscription. Hansda’s depiction of disease as a cultural metaphor broadens the scope of Indian tribal literature, demanding that it be read as inherently political-concerned not only with identity and representation but also with power, resistance, and dignity. The “mysterious ailment” is not Rupī’s alone; it signifies the condition of every subaltern body rendered invisible by structures of caste, patriarchy, and modernity. Through Rupī’s story, silenced histories regain articulation, and the female tribal body emerges as a text of protest, continuity, and cultural resilience. Ultimately, Hansda’s novel redefines the relationship between literature and illness by locating the metaphor of disease within a matrix of socio-political critique. By fusing the insights of Sontag’s (1978) metaphor theory, Kleinman’s (1988) illness narratives, and Spivak’s (1988) subaltern critique, *The Mysterious Ailment of Rupī Baskey*

exemplifies how fiction can illuminate the lived intersections of body, culture, and politics. Hansda's narrative thus contributes not only to tribal literary studies but also to broader conversations in medical humanities and postcolonial theory, reaffirming that illness-when read through the lens of the marginalised-is never merely biological, but profoundly cultural, historical, and political.

Conclusion: Hansda Sowvendra Shekhar's *The Mysterious Ailment of Rupi Baskey* stands as a compelling testament to the ways in which literature transforms illness into a powerful cultural and political metaphor. Rupi's inexplicable disease, resistant to both indigenous healing and modern biomedicine, cannot be reduced to a personal tragedy. Instead, it functions as a symbolic narrative that articulates the vulnerabilities of the Santhal community-poverty, dispossession, gendered oppression, and cultural erosion. By refusing to offer a definitive cure or explanation, Hansda underscores that the "mystery" of Rupi's ailment lies not in the pathology of her body but in the collective anxieties, stigmas, and traumas inscribed upon it. The novel thus highlights the inseparability of illness, stigma, and identity in marginalised communities. Rupi's body becomes a site where patriarchal ideologies, communal beliefs, and cultural politics converge, reminding us that illness is never merely biomedical but always entangled with social meaning. Her suffering embodies the double marginalization of tribal women-silenced within their own communities and rendered invisible in the larger national discourse. This layered representation situates Hansda's work within a wider tradition of subaltern narratives where the body speaks volumes about historical neglect, cultural survival, and resistance.

The contribution of this reading lies in reinterpreting tribal literature through the lens of medical humanities. By shifting the focus from disease as pathology to illness as cultural metaphor, the analysis not only deepens our understanding of Hansda's narrative strategies but also enriches the socio-political discourse surrounding tribal writing. Such an approach demonstrates that indigenous literature is not an ethnographic curiosity but a vital form of political expression, one that interrogates dominant narratives while affirming alternative ways of knowing and being. Looking ahead, this study opens pathways for further research that can situate Hansda's novel in comparative contexts. Ultimately, *The Mysterious Ailment of Rupi Baskey* compels us to rethink the intersections of body, culture, and politics. In Rupi's frail figure, we encounter not just

an individual affliction but the collective wound of a community. Reading her ailment as a cultural and political symbol allows us to hear the silenced voices of the subaltern and to recognize tribal literature as both aesthetic creation and socio-political intervention.

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