



FEMALE CANNIBALISM AS A CRITIQUE OF PATRIARCHY IN HANSDA SOWVENDRA SHEKHAR'S THE MYSTERIOUS AILMENT OF RUPI BASKEY

Dharanya. R

Research Scholar, Vellalar College for Women, Erode.

Dr. Vanitha. A

Assistant Professor, PG & Research Department of English, Vellalar College for Women, Erode.

ABSTRACT

This paper expounds how the emergence of female cannibalism in the Indian tribal societies as delineated in Hansda Sowvendra Shekhar's *The Mysterious Ailment of Rupi Baskey* is a postfeminist tactic of constructing one's identity through consumerism as a way of resistance. Though metaphorically cannibalism mirrors the pros and the cons of consumerism, in literal terms, it sees human beings not as individuals with a mind and heart but just as lumps of edible meat. Nevertheless, the postfeminist Female cannibal reveals and resists the patriarchal exploitation of seeing women as objects yet the question whether cannibalistic tendencies in the female characters as a ploy of resistance inverts and subverts the male power structures and reinforces female power is the point of contention in this paper.

KEYWORDS :

Literature mirrors the life of the society and sometimes records the history of cultural acts and communal ways for the future generations. Hansda Sowvendra Shekhar's novel is the first hand experience and study of the community and culture, the lifestyle of the tribal people, their struggles for survival, along with the internal agony of women suppression by their own people are brought out. Along with it, the novel portrays the women characters as cannibals who consume their rivals with the power of Blackmagic.

The concept of female cannibalism is taken as a tool to bring out the act of cannibalizing the oppressors and oppression against the female protagonist in the novel. It relates to the global context representing gender bias, patriarchal structure and how the marginalised women have become cannibals to build themselves to maintain their self and individualism. Generally, women are objectified in the society where their space is restricted yet specifically in tribal communities, they are pushed to the periphery and muted due to patriarchal tools of subjugation such as marriage, denial of literacy, alienation from the main stream society etc.,

Post feminism has begun in the nineteen eighties where women liberation, empowerment and freedom of choice are advocated. Women started becoming empowered and opt what they feel is right which was absent before as the women were hard wired to the structural set of life. "Post feminism can be seen as a hazy middle ground between feminism and anti-feminism, supporting gender equality and female empowerment but declining a rigorous feminist critique of still-existing patriarchal norms and institutions" (The Canlit Guides Editorial). Similarly in the novel *The Mysterious Ailment of Rupi Baskey*, the transformation from being in a void to fullness has happened through the characters of Rupi Baskey and Dulhari one side and Gurubari and Naickey wife on the other side.

The structure of a society is constructed by the people and the balance in it is acquired only when all are treated equal. When this balance is disrupted by patriarchal power structures, then the consequence will be gender bias and inequality which are detrimental to the evolution of society. "Post feminism included an emphasis on individualism, choice, and agency, a resistance to interrogating structural gendered inequalities, and a renewed focus on a woman's body as a site of liberation". (Flockhard L) The individuality of women is a celebration of freedom from patriarchy and therefore, post feminism embraces and emphasises the idea of individuality and individual choice of women by defying female objectification and subjugation. It also helps to motivate women to craft themselves to elevate their status in

their society or community.

The novel *The Mysterious Ailment of Rupi Baskey*, evidently illustrates the transformation of the mindset of women to be the consumers of their male counterpart and be productive and constructive. If this fails, then the outcome will be drastic because if women choose to be destructive, they are capable of wreaking havoc on the entire social system, even to the extent of becoming cannibals thereby disrupting the dominant relations. This ideology of this female cannibalism and the female consumer culture as tools of resistance are perceptible in this novel literally and metaphorically.

The novel *The Mysterious Ailment of Rupi Baskey*, is written by the Indian writer Hansda Sowvendra Shekhar in the year 2014. It is his debut novel and in which he has portrayed the life and experience his own tribal community of Santhals in Jharkhand, their discrimination in their region and how they cope up to live. Following the threads of his idea, he has brought out the goods and bads of the society with the gothic elements which play a significant role in the novel. Blackmagic is considered to be slice of their culture in which the characters perform cannibalistic rituals to reach their wish. Black magic is a tool used as an operating strategy by the female characters to subvert the power of men and escape from the idea of objectification. The instances of cannibalism evince female awareness and encourages the tribal women to realize their strength of resistance.

Rupi Baskey is the protagonist of the novel *The Mysterious Ailment of Rupi Baskey*, who in the opening scene delivers her elder son Jaipal in the middle of the paddy field. She strives hard to deliver the baby because of some labour complications but ultimately triumphs. She is such a strong person to dispense household chores as well as work in the fields equally along with her family members. Even when she is pregnant, she is able to manage the requirements of her family well.

Rupi baskey comes from Tereldihi hills, her native village to Kadamdhi village her husband Sido's place. Sido, is an educated man and works in Nitra as a teacher. Though an illiterate herself, Rupi takes pride in her husband's education and his knowledge about everything. Putki and Khorda Baskey are her mother-in law and father-in law who are quite famous in their village where the family name Khorda heightens the importance of their community, culture and the impending space to be given for the Jharkhand people. He is also a spirited person to speak against the non-tribal people who discriminate them. Rupi like every woman is full of dreams and was looking forward to realize them in her

marriage life, but that becomes nullified by her husband's liaison with Gurubari.

Gurubari is married to Bairam, a school master in Nitra and also a colleague of Sido. She has illegitimate affair with Sido which is unaware to Rupi in the beginning of her marriage. She later discovers her husband's illicit relationship with Gurubari. Rupi feels unhappy and doubtful in Nitra because of Gurubari who always breaks her confidence. She performs Blackmagic against Rupi to claim her husband which is unnoticed before. Rupi for no reason catches some ailment in Nitra and loses her hope of living. Alternatively, she retains her hope and health in Kadhamdihi and this becomes her routine. Gurubari uses the sickness of Rupi as a reason to separate Sido from Rupi. The power of Blackmagic turns the life of Rupi upside down. Gurubari has an eye on Rupi's first son Jaipal as she has only daughters. In order to lure Sido and his son, she involves herself in black magic which is evident when Sido and Rupi visit Ojha after consulting many doctors about her ailment. Ojha shivers when he witnesses Gurubari behind Sido saying that he cannot change the mind of Sido as Gurubari's power of sacrifice is better than him. Gurubari is a cannibal who indulges in necromancy and human devours. She not only hypnotizes Rupi's husband for her happiness but also holds control over Sido and her panther's like eyes even chases the ojha when he tries to bring out Sido from it.

Rupi alone is not the prey for exploitation and exclusion but also Dulhari, Doso's wife who faces the same. Dulhari, co-sister of Rupi is disliked by her husband Doso because of his extra marital love affair. She is beaten up mercilessly. The treatment of Sido and Doso towards their wives is different but rejection is the ultimate aim. Dulhari uses Blackmagic to separate her husband and his concubine to have a control over him. Here Dulhari becomes a cannibal against her dominating husband. In order to separate her husband, she involves in Blackmagic and kills Doso's lady love. Her intention of bringing her husband into her control is achieved. "Doso, once an irrepressible bull, became a servile lamb" (Shekhar, (2014), pg.165). This transformation shows how Dulhari becomes powerful and now called the strongest woman of Kadhamdihi all because of her magical power.

Dulhari leaves her home after undergoing severe torture of her husband, but becomes strong after that visit. Doso becomes weak and Dulhari becomes strong which shows the strength of Dulhari due to her cannibalistic initiations and inclinations. "I may be a witch, but tell me, did I have a way out? What was mine was being taken away from me. I had to claim it for myself. What other way did I have? Who would've helped me? No one. No one, dai. I had to help myself. I had to do everything by myself. I had to do everything by myself. If it meant using dahni-bidyā, I was ready for that. I had to reclaim what was rightfully mine. Tell me, dai, did I do anything wrong?" (Shekhar, (2014), pg.185). The quote explains that she has to take up the role of a witch to protect her life and husband. No one is there to render their hands to enable her come out of the abyss of pain and suffering. In order to preserve her life, she becomes a cannibal devouring the person who consumed her life. Though it sounds sinister, it helps the tribal women to resist and threaten the patriarchally constructed power structures.

Generally, women are seen as objects, victims and subservient beings. In this novel, Rupi and Dulhari who had faced the adverse effects of male manipulations, contemplates on better positive outcome and that initiates and ignites the spark of empowerment. As hate breeds more hate, the malignancy of men turns to have an adverse effect on them and hitherto victimizers become preys to female cannibalism. Following the idea, the women portrayed in the novel are tribals who are already marginalized for the reason of being tribals and further more ignored and rejected for being

women. Women construct the family and she is the real happiness and hope for it to withstand all obstacles and a guard to liberate the clan from adversities. Although they play significant and crucial roles in their communities they are marginalized by men. Women therefore create a space of their own and stand strong as mountain life giving at the same time life destroying. Thus, biased and ruthless treatment of men towards women leads women to become cannibals in the tribal clan as mentioned by Hansda Sowvendra Shekhar in the novel.

Gothic elements are highly used as a tool to shed light on the nativity and culture of the Santhal community in the novel. Wronged and mistreated women in the Santhal culture reduced themselves to be cannibals to demonstrate their power on powerless men who once exercised their might on show. They show their power to the male community by exercising Blackmagic on their rivals in order to gain fear and respect. For an instance, Naickey whose liver is devoured which is unseen in his corpse and it is believed that might be because of his wife. "His liver was missing! The space it should have occupied was empty" (Shekhar, (2014), pg.80). Santhal women gather and devour animals and human in Konkami night. Yet another incident is a Santhal man who is a neighbor of Naickey house sees a creature with long arms swinging in the tree. He notices it with a pair of large eyes without irises which drives him speechless. Women of this community, as an act of cannibalism devour human, animals and send creature to scare their rivals. They become Cannibals to survive and to escape from subjugation.

It is also perceived in the novel that young women are ostensibly come forward to take constructive steps towards their life and career. Similarly, Rupali, daughter in law of Rupi Baskey encourages the recent women empowerment through education and career. She gets down to construct extra rooms where she neither fights nor gets upset but takes up the ownership despite many disapprovals. Rupi becomes happy for the hope and dreams that her daughter -in-law Rupali possesses such a power of resistance so that it could be passed on to the next generation. The novel illustrates that female cannibalism, that is female consumption of man literally and metaphorically is a powerful tool of resistance in tribal community so much so that the women are not pushed to the periphery.

The ideology of female cannibalism becomes centric to the oppressed and the objectified women who are in the Santhal community. Suppressed for various reasons- social and political. It aids to attain extreme confidence to survive and sustain in their life. Thus, paper highlights the efforts put forth by the tribal women of the Santhal community to bring the power of resistance by degenerating themselves into cannibals. Women in Santhal culture, take up Blackmagic as a tool to exercise their authority against the male dominating tribal space. Through cannibalism and consumerism, women project the power of women against men and initiate the idea of reinforcing power to invert the patriarchal structure and by way of objectifying and victimizing men. It also heightens the status of women to aware of the exploitation and their overcoming through the bold confrontation of turning into cannibalism which would continue in generations to come devouring and consuming men unless Indian tribal community such as Santhals get exposed to education and are treated with equal rights as put forward by the author in the novel.

Thus, Cannibalism becomes one of the strategies used to subvert the power of men and eliminate women from objectification. Although they use the ploy of cannibalism, it is still questionable how far the tribal women have attained freedom or have been subverted from the position of object when the patriarchy is deeply ingrained in the space of tribal

psycho. The question stays unresponded till the power, knowledge and awareness through education illumine the tribal minds equivocally and till then devour of men by women turned femme fatale will continue to hold sway.

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