Fragmented Selves and Indigenous Resistance: A Critical Study of Adivasi Identity, Memory, and Marginalisation in Hansda Sowvendra Shekhar's My Father's Garden

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Abstract:

Hansda Sowvendra Shekhar's My Father's Garden *(2018) is a seminal contribution to contemporary Adivasi writing in English, foregrounding Santhal identity, cultural memory, sexuality, and socio-political marginalisation through an autobiographical lens. This research paper critically examines how the novel documents the fragmentation of an Adivasi self negotiating modernity, professional displacement, caste prejudice, and intimate relationships in a rapidly globalizing India. Divided into two sections "Love," and "Politics" the novel employs a non-linear structure to mirror the narrator's psychological and cultural dislocation. While the first two sections explore the vulnerability of emotional and , the final section interrogates systemic corruption, bureaucratic violence, and discrimination faced by tribal communities in Jharkhand. The study adopts postcolonial Indigenous theory, subaltern studies, and identity politics as its theoretical framework to explore the narrator's conflicted belonging, his relationship with his father as a symbolic repository of ancestral memory, and the intersections of land, home, and displacement. The paper argues that the novel refuses mainstream literary expectations by centering Adivasi subjectivity, linguistic hybridity, and everyday politics. Through its intimate storytelling, Shekhar offers a counter-narrative to dominant Indian English fiction, destabilising homogenized national imaginaries and asserting the complexity of Adivasi lives. This research paper concludes that* My Father's Garden *is a crucial text that not only documents Indigenous trauma but also constructs spaces of resistance, resilience, and self-affirmation. It stands as an important literary intervention that expands the terrain of Indian English literature by amplifying Adivasi voices that have historically been pushed to the margins.*

Keyword: Adivasi Literature, Santhal Identity, Indigenous Writing, Marginalisation, Memory, Modernity and Subalternity.

Introduction:

My Father's Garden (2018) by Hansda Sowvendra Shekhar marks a significant shift in Indian English literature by foregrounding Adivasi subjectivity from within the community rather than through an external anthropological gaze. Published in 2018, the novel comes from a writer who is both a Santhal and a medical doctor, giving him rare insight into the lived realities of Indigenous communities in Eastern India. The novel is structured in two interconnected yet stylistically distinct parts "Love,"and "Politics"each narrating different phases in the protagonist's life while exploring emotional vulnerability, sexual identity, and socio-political marginalisation. Together, they form a portrait of a fragmented self negotiating the tensions of modernity, displacement, and inherited cultural memory. Indian English literature has traditionally privileged upper-caste, urban, and dominant cultural groups, resulting in a systematic exclusion of tribal voices. When Adivasis appeared at all, they were often exoticized or depicted as primitive subjects devoid of agency. Shekhar's writing disrupts this legacy by presenting an insider's perspective grounded in the rhythms of everyday Santhal life, linguistic hybridity, and the complex negotiation between home and elsewhere. Rather than romanticizing tribal culture, he depicts its contradictions, vulnerabilities, and changing social dynamics. His characters are real, flawed, desiring individuals shaped by social structures and personal histories.

The figure of the father in the novel serves as a symbolic anchor, representing home, community memory, and the fading sense of belonging that the narrator tries to reclaim. The narrator's move away from his village to urban professional spaces creates a psychic and emotional rupture. His education becomes both a source of empowerment and a cause of alienation—reflecting a common dilemma faced by many Indigenous individuals navigating mainstream institutions. The father's garden becomes an extended metaphor for rootedness, continuity, and the unspoken emotional bond that ties the narrator to his past. In the section "Love," the novel explores young adulthood and college romance, revealing the narrator's struggle for emotional connection amidst insecurity and cultural difference. The final section, "Politics," shifts sharply into a socio-political register, documenting bureaucratic corruption, caste arrogance, and discrimination faced by Adivasis in the medical and administrative systems of Jharkhand. It exposes how state institutions become instruments of violence against Indigenous communities through land dispossession, inadequate medical infrastructure, and everyday prejudice. Through its experimental form and deeply personal voice, *My Father's Garden* emerges as a text that challenges dominant narratives about Indigeneity in India. It speaks to a larger crisis of representation, where marginalised communities reclaim the right to narrate their stories on their own terms. This research paper situates the novel within Indigenous and subaltern literary traditions and argues that Shekhar's work is a powerful intervention in reimagining Adivasi identity in contemporary India.

literature review:

Research on Hansda Sowvendra Shekhar's *My Father's Garden* remains comparatively limited due to its recent publication, yet the novel has received scholarly attention within the broader fields of Adivasi literature, Indigenous studies, and contemporary Indian English fiction.

This literature review synthesises critical works relevant to the study of Adivasi identity, marginalisation, representation, sexuality, and postcolonial Indigenous discourse. It also examines existing scholarship on Shekhar's writing style, thematic concerns, and political significance, situating *My Father's Garden* within an emerging body of Indigenous literary production in India. Adivasi literature in English is a recent but rapidly growing domain. G.N. Devy's *Adivasi Will Not Dance: Voices from India's Indigenous Communities* and his larger *People's Linguistic Survey of India* highlight the erasure of tribal voices from mainstream Indian literature and argue for the reclamation of Indigenous epistemologies. Devy asserts that tribal narratives preserve ecological memory, oral cultures, and community structures that challenge dominant literary frameworks. His work provides a theoretical foundation for understanding Shekhar's attempt to bring Santhal subjectivity into English-language fiction.

Similarly, Virginius Xaxa's writings on Adivasi identity and marginalisation—particularly *The Adivasi Question* offer a sociopolitical lens for interpreting the structural inequalities depicted in the "Politics" section of *My Father's Garden*. Xaxa argues that tribal marginalisation is not accidental but results from historical processes of dispossession, state violence, and systematic exclusion from institutions. These ideas directly resonate with Shekhar's portrayal of bureaucratic corruption, healthcare negligence, and caste prejudice in Jharkhand. Scholars such as Alpa Shah, in works like *In the Shadows of the State*, discuss how Indigenous communities in Jharkhand and Chhattisgarh navigate state institutions, land conflicts, and insurgency. Shah's argument that Adivasi experiences exist at the intersection of state neglect and capitalist exploitation provides essential context for understanding Shekhar's socio-political narrative. The novel's "Politics" section mirrors Shah's observation that Indigenous people often face discrimination even when they are educated professionals working within state systems. Critical scholarship on Indigenous writing emphasises the importance of self-representation. Bill Ashcroft and Helen Tiffin's postcolonial theories on voice and agency support the view that Indigenous authors challenge hegemonic narratives by telling stories from within cultural frameworks. In this sense, Shekhar's refusal to exoticise or romanticise Santhal life aligns with a global Indigenous literary tradition focused on authentic self-narration. Academic work on sexuality in Indian literature such as Ruth Vanita's and Anjali Arondekar's scholarship provides a useful framework for analysing of the novel. Shekhar's unflinching depiction of desire, loneliness, queer-coded relationships, and emotional vulnerability complicates stereotypes that tribal communities are sexually uninhibited or primitive. Instead, he presents sexuality as a deeply human, psychological terrain shaped by social pressures and personal longing. Existing criticism on Shekhar's writing acknowledges his bold narrative style. Several reviewers, including those from *The Hindu*, *Scroll.in*, and *The Indian Express*, note that Shekhar's fiction foregrounds emotional honesty, linguistic hybridity, and political urgency. Scholars have described his prose as "unadorned yet piercing," capable of revealing the fractures within Adivasi identity caused by migration, discrimination, and modernity. While *My Father's Garden* has not yet received extensive academic monographs, scholarly articles have begun to explore its themes. Critics argue that the novel expands the terrain of Indian English literature by bringing in a distinctly Adivasi consciousness.

Its non-linear narrative and autobiographical elements have been read as strategies for representing fragmentation—both personal and cultural. Furthermore, researchers highlight the novel's contribution to debates around belonging, displacement, and the emotional toll of navigating casteist and bureaucratic environments. One area that scholars consistently emphasise is the metaphor of the garden. The father's garden is interpreted as a symbol of rootedness, memory, and intergenerational continuity. Critics note that the narrator's emotional distance from the garden reflects his growing alienation from cultural identity and ancestral land—a theme also explored in the works of writers like Mamang Dai and Easterine Kire in Northeast Indian literature. Despite emerging scholarship, there is a noticeable gap in comparative and identity-oriented studies of *My Father's Garden*. Few works analyse the intersection of sexuality, Indigenous identity, and professional spaces. There is also limited academic engagement with the novel's experimental structure and its depiction of emotional fragmentation across different life stages.

This research paper addresses these gaps by offering a comprehensive analysis of Adivasi identity, memory, sexuality, and socio-political marginalisation through a postcolonial Indigenous framework. It positions *the novel* within the evolving canon of Indian Indigenous literature in English and contributes to the broader discourse on subaltern representation, cultural belonging, and the politics of voice.

Fragmented Selfhood and the Crisis of Adivasi Identity:

The novel is a narrative deeply concerned with the constitution of Adivasi identity in a world that constantly demands assimilation while simultaneously denying acceptance. The protagonist's journey across different geographical, emotional, and institutional terrains captures the profound fragmentation that results from negotiating multiple, often conflicting worlds. From his childhood in a Santhal village to his experiences in medical colleges, hospitals, and bureaucratic offices, the narrator exists in a liminal space neither fully rooted in his tribal origins nor fully embraced by mainstream society. His education, which should ideally serve as a bridge toward empowerment, instead creates emotional and cultural distance, demonstrating a paradox common to many Indigenous individuals in India. As the narrator grows, the very structures that promise inclusion schools, universities, professional institutions—become spaces where he must constantly defend his identity, reveal or conceal it strategically, and navigate the prejudices embedded within them. This produces not simply a fractured cultural identity but a fractured selfhood, one that is at once proud of its heritage yet burdened by the emotional labour required to survive in hegemonic spaces.

The novel portrays identity as a fluid and contested terrain rather than a fixed essence. The narrator's shifting environments force him to continuously renegotiate who he is, how he relates to others, and what aspects of his identity he must hide or amplify for survival. This instability mirrors the collective experience of Indigenous communities whose cultural practices, dialects, and memories are often marginalised in narratives of national progress. Shekhar's protagonist thus becomes a literary figure through whom the reader witnesses the psychic toll of living between worlds a life defined by displacement, longing, and an unending search for belonging.

The Symbolic Weight of the Father and the Garden:

At the heart of the novel lies the powerful symbol of the father's garden, a metaphor that encapsulates the narrator's buried memories, cultural belonging, and the generational continuity that anchors Indigenous life. The father stands as a stabilising force, a quiet repository of wisdom, patience, and ancestral connection. His garden is more than a physical space; it is a living testament to the values of nurturing, rootedness, and community that define Santhal worldview. Each plant cultivated by the father becomes a symbolic seed of heritage—carefully tended, resilient, and bound to the soil. The garden's quiet presence throughout the novel contrasts sharply with the narrator's restless movement across urban landscapes, underscoring the emotional dislocation that accompanies his attempts at upward mobility.

The narrator's relationship with the garden is laden with ambivalence. On the one hand, it evokes nostalgia and comfort; on the other, it becomes a reminder of a life slowly slipping out of reach. His growing physical and emotional distance from home deepens during his years away, symbolising the gradual erosion of cultural memory. When he returns, the garden remains unchanged, bearing the imprint of his father's care even as he himself has become internally fragmented. The father's eventual death intensifies the symbolic rupture. The garden, once a metaphor for continuity, becomes a painful reminder of loss—an inheritance that the narrator can never fully reclaim. Through this symbol, Shekhar articulates the emotional and existential cost of displacement, revealing how mobility in a modern nation often comes at the expense of rootedness, tradition, and a sense of self that is intertwined with ancestral land.

Love: Emotional Vulnerability and the Weight of Cultural Difference:

The first section of the novel, "Love," centres on the narrator's early romantic relationship, revealing the fragility and insecurity that shape his emotional world. This portrayal of love is striking in its refusal to follow conventional romantic tropes. Instead, Shekhar uses the narrative to reveal how social structures like caste, class, and ethnicity shape intimate relationships. The narrator's sense of inadequacy is deeply tied to his Adivasi background. He fears rejection not solely because of personal shortcomings but because he has internalised the gaze of a society that positions tribal identities as inferior. His lover's more privileged cultural location reinforces these insecurities, subtly highlighting the uneven emotional terrain the narrator must cross. `Love becomes a site where the narrator confronts his own feelings of unworthiness and invisibility. The emotional distance he experiences is not simply the product of miscommunication or personal incompatibility; it is born from systemic inequalities that script Indigenous bodies as less deserving of affection, stability, and recognition. Shekhar's treatment of this relationship is delicate yet penetrating, revealing how deeply marginalisation infiltrates the most intimate aspects of life. Through this portrayal, the novel challenges the stereotype of the "tribal" as instinct-driven or emotionally simplistic, offering instead a nuanced representation of vulnerability, longing, and the psychological scars imposed by social hierarchies. The emotional turbulence of this section lays the foundation for the narrator's continuing struggle with identity, connection, and self-worth in the later sections of the novel.

Politics: Institutional Violence and the Reality of Marginalisation:

The another section, "Politics," marks a dramatic shift from personal to political consciousness. Here, the narrator's professional life as a doctor becomes the site through which the systemic marginalisation of Adivasis is laid bare. Shekhar exposes the harsh realities of Jharkhand's public healthcare system corruption, bureaucratic inefficiency, caste-based prejudice, and the indifference of administrative authorities. Unlike the earlier sections, which explored internal struggles, "Politics" foregrounds external structures of power that shape the narrator's world. The discrimination he faces from colleagues reflects the entrenched casteism within Indian institutions, where educated Adivasis are often viewed with suspicion or condescension. Despite his professional competence, the narrator is repeatedly subjected to subtle humiliations and overt disparagement. His identity becomes a battleground. The very institutions meant to uplift marginalised communities become spaces that reproduce inequality. The narrator's disillusionment grows as he encounters patients who suffer not only from illness but from poverty, ignorance, and the state's chronic neglect of tribal areas.

By situating the protagonist within this hostile bureaucratic environment, Shekhar reiterates that marginalisation is systemic, not incidental. The state machinery's failure to protect Indigenous rights reflects a long history of dispossession. Through the narrator's growing frustration and ethical conflicts, the novel critiques the very foundations of governance that claim progress while perpetuating exclusion. "Politics" thus becomes a culmination of the novel's exploration of fragmentation revealing that personal alienation is inseparable from institutional violence.

Narrative Fragmentation as a Representation of Indigenous Experience:

The narrative structure of the novel is itself a critical element of meaning. The division into three distinct yet interconnected sections mirrors the disjointedness of the narrator's life. Rather than offering a linear narrative of growth, Shekhar presents a mosaic of experiences that reflect the fractured consciousness of someone navigating multiple cultural worlds. Each section possesses its own rhythm and emotional tone: nostalgic and tender in "Love," and sharp and political in "Politics." This fragmentation is not merely stylistic but emblematic of Indigenous identity in a nation that both contains and marginalises diverse cultural communities.

Moreover, the prose is marked by linguistic hybridity, blending standard English with the cadence of Santhal speech patterns. This deliberate stylistic choice resists homogenisation, asserting the legitimacy of Indigenous voices within Indian English fiction. The shifts in voice, tone, and narrative intensity echo the narrator's internal instability, reinforcing the idea that Indigenous identity cannot be captured through linear, essentialist storytelling modes. Fragmentation becomes a narrative strategy that mirrors cultural loss, emotional disconnection, and the fractured landscapes of modern Adivasi existence.

Displacement, Modernity, and Cultural Erosion:

Throughout the novel, displacement emerges as both a physical and emotional condition. The narrator's movement from rural to urban spaces is emblematic of the larger historical patterns in which Indigenous communities are uprooted through development, migration, and state policies. In the urban world, he is an outsider. In the village, he returns as someone altered by education and exposure to modernity. This dual alienation reflects the painful reality that mobility often demands cultural sacrifice. The narrator embodies the unresolved tension between aspirations for progress and the grief of losing cultural intimacy. Modernity in the novel is portrayed as a double-edged sword. While education and employment offer economic stability, they also create spaces where Indigenous individuals are pressured to conform to casteist and elitist norms. The novel exposes how modernity, for Adivasis, is not a liberating promise but a site of negotiation, compromise, and vulnerability. The erosion of language, tradition, and communal connections emerges as a quiet but powerful undertone throughout the narrative. Shekhar's portrayal of modernity complicates simplistic narratives of progress, showing instead how it deepens fragmentation and accelerates cultural displacement.

Reclaiming Indigenous Representation:

The novel is a powerful act of reclaiming Indigenous representation within Indian English literature. Historically, Adivasis have been depicted by non-Adivasi writers through simplistic stereotypes as primitive, exotic, or tragic figures. Shekhar subverts this legacy by writing from within his cultural world, presenting Adivasi life as complex, emotionally rich, politically charged, and deeply human. His narrative refuses exoticisation or romantic pity, instead offering an unembellished portrayal of the everyday realities of Indigenous existence.

Through its intimate voice, linguistic hybridity, and political critique, the novel asserts that Indigenous literature is not a peripheral or regional phenomenon but an integral part of contemporary Indian literary discourse. Shekhar's protagonist stands as a representation of countless Indigenous individuals experiencing displacement, desire, loss, and resilience. By giving voice to a marginalised consciousness, the novel begins the critical process of rewriting the literary and cultural map of the nation. The analysis of *My Father's Garden* reveals multiple interconnected findings that illuminate the psychological, cultural, and political dimensions of Indigenous life represented in contemporary Indian English literature. One of the most significant findings is that Hansda Sowvendra Shekhar constructs Adivasi identity not as a monolithic or static category but as a dynamic, evolving consciousness shaped by lived experiences of displacement, mobility, and systemic marginalisation. The protagonist's fragmented selfhood emerges as a central narrative device, reflecting the internal ruptures created by navigating between tribal heritage and urban modernity. This fragmentation is not depicted as personal failure but as a consequence of structural forces that shape Indigenous lives in India. Another key finding is the symbolic and emotional weight carried by the father's garden.

The garden operates as a sustained metaphor for rootedness, continuity, and cultural memory. Its presence throughout the narrative often in contrast to the narrator's transient and unsettled life demonstrates how Indigenous connection to land extends beyond physical space into emotional and spiritual identity. The loss of access to this garden, especially after the father's death, reflects broader patterns of cultural erosion and the pain associated with generational disconnect. This reinforces the argument that land and ancestry are central pillars of Indigenous subjectivity. The study also finds that Shekhar's treatment of love and sexuality challenges mainstream stereotypes about Adivasi emotional life. The sections "Love bring forth a nuanced portrayal of desire, vulnerability, longing, and emotional insecurity. The narrator's romantic anxieties, and experiences of loneliness reveal that marginalisation deeply influences intimate relationships. These portrayals dismantle essentialist notions that often dehumanise tribal communities by reducing them to sensual or instinctual categories. The "Politics" section provides another significant finding about systemic oppression. The narrator's encounters within the healthcare bureaucracy highlight how state institutions perpetuate inequality through caste prejudice, corruption, and negligence. The discrimination he faces illustrates the paradox of Adivasi representation: even as Indigenous individuals enter professional spaces, they continue to face exclusion, suspicion, and exploitation. This section exposes the deep structural biases embedded within Indian governance systems that hinder Indigenous progress.

The final finding pertains to Shekhar's narrative structure and linguistic choices. The novel's fragmentation and linguistic hybridity serve as deliberate strategies to mirror the protagonist's fractured consciousness and to resist homogenising literary norms. By embedding Santhal speech rhythms within English prose, Shekhar asserts the legitimacy of Indigenous voices within Indian literary discourse. Overall, the findings suggest that the novel is not merely a personal story but a powerful socio-political commentary that expands the boundaries of Indigenous representation in Indian English fiction.

Conclusion:

The novel stands as a landmark text in contemporary Adivasi writing, offering an intimate and politically charged portrayal of Indigenous identity in India. Through its fragmented narrative structure, multi-layered characterisation, and symbolic imagery, the novel presents a powerful commentary on the internal and external struggles faced by Adivasi individuals. The narrator's journey across the sections "Love," "and "Politics" reveals how personal experiences are deeply intertwined with cultural and systemic forces. The result is a vivid portrayal of a protagonist who, despite being educated and professionally competent, remains vulnerable to discrimination, emotional disorientation, and cultural erasure. The novel highlights that the fragmentation of identity is not simply psychological but rooted in the broader socio-political marginalisation of Adivasi communities. The tension between modernity and tradition emerges as a recurring motif. As the narrator moves through urban landscapes, he risks losing connection to the ancestral world embodied by his father and the garden.

This loss is emblematic of the larger cultural erosion experienced by tribal communities in the wake of globalisation, migration, and state-led development. The garden becomes an enduring symbol of a cultural heritage that offers stability, belonging, and continuity qualities that the modern world increasingly denies Indigenous people. The "Politics" section elevates the novel from a personal narrative to a structural critique. Through his professional experiences, the narrator exposes the deep inequities within India's healthcare system and its discriminatory attitudes toward Adivasi populations. This section underscores that the challenges Indigenous communities face are not merely cultural or emotional but institutional. The systemic neglect and prejudice reflect historical injustices that the Indian state continues to reproduce. In short, *My Father's Garden* is not only a literary work but also a socio-political document that critiques India's failure to meaningfully include Indigenous voices in its national fabric. It expands the scope of Indian English literature by foregrounding Adivasi consciousness, linguistic hybridity, and lived experience. Through its intimate storytelling and political urgency, the novel calls for a reimagining of national narratives—ones that embrace diversity, challenge marginalisation, and honour the resilience of Indigenous cultures. As such, Shekhar's work stands as an essential contribution to Indigenous literary traditions and a significant text for scholars of identity, mobility, and postcolonial studies.

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