

Writing the Asur Self: Resistance and Identity in Sushma Asur's "The Mountain's Home Is Gone"

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Abstract

Preserving tribal heritage has become a significant globe concern. Tribal literature, though part of Indian literary studies, remains largely underexplored. Mainstream literature often privileges elite languages and narratives, marginalizing indigenous voices. Rooted in oral traditions such as myths, songs, folktales, and rituals, tribal literature goes beyond creative expression. Contemporary tribal writers employ literature as a medium of resistance, documentation of lived experiences, and identity preservation. With indigenous languages rapidly declining, recording oral narratives in written form is crucial for safeguarding cultural heritage. This paper seeks to draw attention to themes of identity, resistance, and self-representation emphasizing the importance of traditional knowledge, language and rituals in the poetry of Sushma Asur, an emerging feminine voice from the Asur community. Through textual analysis, the study examines land alienation, gendered oppression, and cultural and ecological erosion reflected in her poetry, representing the struggles, history, and cultural consciousness of tribal women.

Keywords: Asur community, Myth and reinterpretation, Marginalized voices, Iron-smelters.

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Introduction

The tribal community of India is rich in culture, linguistic, and ecological heritage shaped through generations. These traditions, values, and indigenous knowledge systems prioritize sustainable living. The languages, belief system, and traditional knowledge is home to an extraordinary diversity and important part civilizational mosaic of nation. These communities are inhabitants of forests, hills, and plateaus embodies different cultural identities shaped from a close interaction with nature from centuries. These traditions have sustained in the form of oral narratives, spiritual practices,

and community-based governance and education. Although in the contemporary era of globalization, cultural homogenization, and rapid industrialization, tribal communities are marginalized by dominant society, facing challenges like identity crisis, cultural erosion, and displacement. The intersection of literature, indigenous knowledge systems, and education is a critically emerging field of inquiry. Tribal literature plays a crucial role in preserving indigenous identity. Myths, folktales, chants, ballads, songs, and ritual performances were passed on from generations as oral tradition as living archives of collective memory. The storytelling is the main spark for the transmission of traditions, rituals, and events through the ages. It helped in preserving histories, genealogies, ethical codes, and narratives that define community life. In the postcolonial period, contemporary tribal writers used literature to portray resistance and self-representation in literary art form. The shift from oral to written form challenges the stereotypes. Literature enabled the contemporary tribal writer to redefine the tribal identity from insiders' perspectives. The major themes were "Jal, Jungle, Jameen."

Language is often considered a primary medium of passing customs, medicine knowledge, and oral histories. When younger generations switch from their mother-tongue to the dominant language intergenerational continuity is affected. Despite all the constitutional safeguards for Scheduled Tribes, has limited access to quality healthcare, infrastructure, employment, and education. The Asur community, faces these intersecting challenges in daily lives. They have experienced linguistic vulnerability, displacement, and occupational decline. However, government has taken certain initiatives to improve conditions, but lacks in the culturally sensitive frameworks. An integrated strategy interlinking policy, education, and literature requires to address these concerns. Literature has preserved the memory and assert identity, whereas education transmits and revitalize knowledge. It is important to safeguard indigenous language and document oral storytelling for ecological balance and democratic participation. Engaging with tribal voices will enrich academic discourse and reorient development towards sustainable futures.

The Asur Community: History and Cultural Context

...A study of primitive iron smelters evidence that the Asurs are the oldest working communities of India and were inventors of iron smelting. It is also believed that Asur tribe made weapons for the battle of Mahabharata...-K. K. Leuva

The term 'Asur' had a resemblance with Ashur in Assyria which means 'powerful people'. Asurs' are mentioned in many ancient texts such as Rigveda, Upanishads, Markandeya, Aranyakas, and Epics of Hindu sacred literature. Sayan Acharya describes them as 'powerful' (Balvan), 'destroyer of enemies' (Shatroonam nirasitah), 'highly intelligent' (Pragnavan), and so on. The Asur community, is often misrepresented as 'demons' in dominant mythological narratives. They claim to be the descended of ancient Asuras associated with the art of metal crafts. Their traditional technology of iron-smelting gave them distinct identity. The Asur community in India is one of the Particularly Vulnerable Tribe Groups (PVTGs). They are primarily found in the state of Jharkhand, especially residing in the districts like Gumla, Latehar, and Lohardaga. A small population lives in the neighboring states. According to 2011 census, the population of Asur community in Jharkhand was about 22000. It was categorized as PVTGs in 2006, at the recommendation of the Dhebar Commission. The Ministry of Tribal Affairs states that, this community has low literacy rate, economic instability, and declining population.

Sushma Asur: Voice of Indigenous Resistance

'I am the first Asur to document our history'-Sushma Asur

Sushma Asur was born in 1983 in a tribal community in Jharkhand is an emerging Adivasi writer, poet, and cultural activist of the clan, has taken up the responsibility of expressing the angst of her community. She belongs to the Asur community, one of the Particularly Vulnerable Tribal Groups (PVTGs) of Eastern India. Her simplicity and literary talent are being admired by many. Bhawani

Prasad Mishra's '*Satpura ke Ghane Jungle*' inspired her to document about her tribe and village. Gradually, she learned Kurukh, Mundari, Nagpuri besides Hindi and Asuri. She writes in both Hindi and Asuri. In the era of endangered tribal languages her multilingualism offers hope to scholars and urban readers. Growing up in the rural environment of Sakhuapani, with limited access to education and economic hardship, Sushma witnessed the marginalization and cultural erosion of her tribe.

Sushma Asur

Her poetry emerges the lived experiences of the Asur tribe of Jharkhand, deeply rooted to its oral traditions, everyday struggles, and sacred rituals. '*Asur Siring*' (2010) her collection of poems is one of the first written texts in Asuri literature where the speaker addresses forest as an ancestor and protector. Sushma Asur has worked toward the upliftment of her community by promoting the Asur language and culture. Her work employs minimal ornamentation marked by simple, emotionally charged, and direct style. Her poetry possesses authenticity and intimacy, resembling the oral storytelling traditions of Asur community. She reclaims tribal identity by challenging the mainstream narrative that portrays the Asurs negatively. A powerful feminine strength is conveyed throughout her poetry. The resilience, lived experiences, and struggles of tribal women is depicted in her poetry. Although her themes center on resilience and the reclamation of identity, she avoids aggression, maintaining the calm confidence and firm conviction. Her other works are "*Ploughing*", "*How Many Days*", "*We shall live on Fearless like the plateau*" published in Kavi Man Jani Man (edited by Vandana Tete), 2019.

Research Methodology

This study employs interpretative and qualitative research methodology grounded in textual analysis. Sushma Asur's "*The Mountain Home is Gone*" focuses on themes, narrative strategy, symbolism, and representation of indigenous identity within the text. The study primarily analyzes Sushma Asur's "*The Mountain Home is Gone*" as the primary source, while the secondary sources include journal articles and books on Adivasi literature of Jharkhand. Due to limited translation availability of the complete Asur Siring collection, the present study is confined to selected works of Sushma Asur, particularly "*The Mountain's Home is Gone*."

Theoretical Framework

To interpret Sushma Asur's "*The Mountain Home is Gone*" the study applies ecofeminism and indigenous criticism as theoretical framework. Ecofeminism focuses on the exploitation of natural resources and marginalized community under industrial and capitalist forces. The poem portrays the realities by offering insights from the struggles of indigenous community caused by industrialization. Further the study focuses on collective memory, indigenous identity, and harmonious relation between nature and indigenous community. The poem acts as a tool of resistance and self-representation reclaiming the Asur identity.

Textual Analysis: "The Mountain's Home is Gone"

Sushma Asur's "*The Mountain's Home is Gone*" portrays ecological erosion, collective resistance, and cultural erasure through a deeply symbolic and emotional representation of nature. The opening line of the poem personifies the natural world and foreground the ecological crises unfolding in Jharkhand due to industrial expansion, mining, and deforestation. The Asur community worships nature as a living entity and remains deeply connected to its roots. The loss of flora and fauna caused by mining and industrialization has adversely affected traditional livelihood. Thus, the poet establishes a parallel between cultural disintegration and ecological degradation, implying that the destruction of land also erodes indigenous identity, memory, and spirituality. In the opening stanza:

(stanza 1, line 1-8, The Mountain's Home is Gone)

"The mountain is crying.

The river is sobbing.

The waterfalls of Jharkhand are weeping

The earth and the hills are all in mourning.

All the Asurs are crying....

No flowers or fruits on the hills.

No water flows in the rivers."

These lines are symbolically establishing a connection between nature and the Asur community through powerful imagery. The poem presents the Asur community as both victims of exploitation and destructors. The personification – "The mountain is crying / The river is sobbing / The waterfalls of Jharkhand are weeping" – reflects human emotion in nature. "The waterfalls of Jharkhand" – is referred to the Jharkhand's mineral wealth and plateaus, which have been exploited for mining. The "weeping" represents ecological imbalance and erosion of natural resources. "All the Asurs are crying" – The poet emphasizes on the sufferings caused by environmental degradation, mining, industrial expansion, and deforestation. Repetition of words such as 'sobbing', 'weeping', 'crying' is used to emphasize the tone of mourning and ecological loss at the first stanza of the poem. Thus, the speaker laments for the ecological destruction and cultural loss.

(stanza 3, line 15-17, The Mountain's Home is Gone)

"We once made iron –

Now with that same iron,

The companies are ripping open the earth

Spilling blood.

They are killing us with the same iron."

The line – "We once made iron" – emphasizes the traditional iron-smelting skills of Asurs. This phrase expresses the pride of indigenous craftsmanship. However, 'same iron' is used as an irony in the next line. The same iron is being used by companies for mineral extraction. The extraction of minerals in large-scale has resulted in ecological imbalance. Iron tools and machines are not just extracting minerals but assaulting nature. 'Spilling blood' refers to the violence. It suggests that destruction of biodiversity is parallel to harming a living soul. The 'blood' symbolizes the Asur community, whereas 'bleeding' refers to the Earth. The line "They are killing us with the same iron" is used for betrayal. It was iron, which empowered the community now has become an instrument of destruction. The poem argues that how industrialization has resulted in cultural erosion, displacement, and ecological destruction. These lines portray the exploitation faced due to cultural erasure.

(stanza 4, line 21- The Mountain's Home is Gone)

"But we will live – fearless like the plateau."

After expressing mourning over cultural erosion, ecological imbalance, and exploitation, the line – "But we will live – fearless like the plateau" – is a powerful line expressing resistance and determination. 'But' signifies the defiance, whereas 'live' emphasizes survival. The word 'we' represents the collective unity and shared resilience of the Asur community. They chose their identity, ancestral memory, traditions, and language. The line – "fearless like the plateau" – is symbolic. A plateau withstands in harsh weather, time, and erosion; it is stable, enduring, vast, and elevated. The

speaker associates the strength of Asur community with the plateau. Jharkhand's geographical landscape is historically connected to Asurs' livelihood and identity. Land is used as a metaphor for resilience. It reflects cultural survival against industrialization. Therefore, this line is a shift of tone from mourning to resistance. The imagery counters the dominant perception of tribal communities as fragile or fading by foregrounding their survival and resilience. It transforms sufferings into resistance and highlights the determination of the Asur community to preserve its cultural and ecological identity.

(stanza 10, line 51-53, The Mountain's Home is Gone)

"We will learn to speak like you.

We will learn to dance like you.

We will hunt like you "The lines - "We will learn to speak like you/ We will learn to dance like you/ We will hunt like you" - reflect the choice between cultural survival and adaptation. 'We will' is a repeated structure in the poem, which portrays irony and determination, emphasizing the willingness of survival. The word 'you' here represents the mainstream society, colonizers, and industrial forces. But the subtle resistance lies beneath apparent acceptance. The line - "speak like you" - shows the pressure on the tribal community to abandon their languages and adopt the dominant tongue as a tool of control and power. "Dance like you" emphasizes on the traditional art forms that are replaced by main stream expressions. Dance represents the spiritual bond and collective memory with ancestors and land. The line - "We will hunt like you" has stronger implications. It suggests the effects of industrialization and displacement. It portrays the altered relation with environment and forced adaptation to new economy. On a deeper context, these line does not convey surrender but resilience. The community asserts their ability to learn, adapt, and survive in harsh conditions, The repetition of 'we will' portrays their strength and modernity: they are not losing their identity but consciously negotiating with the changes. The irony - If survival demands adaptation, they are ready to do so without losing their identity. Thus, these lines capture the complex reality of tribal existence in 21st century.

Conclusion

"The Mountain's Home is Gone" by Sushma Asur portrays the indigenous resistance and ecological grief. The poet highlights nature's suffering with imagery of drying rivers, weeping mountains, and displaced animals. The loss of culture and identity reflects the deep interdependence of Asur community on natural habitat. Symbolically, ecological erosion is parallel to indigenous knowledge system. The poem states that ecological erosion is inseparable from marginalized tribal communities. It signifies the physical displacement along with collapse of cosmology rooted to ancestral continuity. Ultimately, the poem is a lament as well as assertion. It mourns over irreversible loss, but also preserves culture through poetic expression. Thus, it is an act of resistance reclaiming the Adivasi identity. It reminds the readers to rethink about the indigenous knowledge systems.

Tribal literature is one of the unexplored areas in Indian literary studies. The mainstream literature primarily focuses on the dominant and elite narratives, leaving behind the marginalized indigenous voices. Tribal communities have a rich mosaic of oral traditions - folktales, myths, and ritual chants. Most of this tribal heritage has not been systematically documented or critically analyzed. Contemporary tribal writers like Jacinta Kerketta and Nirmala Putul Murmu began to document the oral narratives of indigenous communities. The common themes of these writers were "Jal, Jungle, Jameen." They used literary art forms to portray the cultural loss, ecological loss, displacement, and suffering of indigenous communities.

One of the major reasons for this neglect is the predominance of oral traditions in tribal communities. For centuries, tribal communities have relied on storytelling as a means of preserving their culture, history, and identity. Documenting these oral traditions can help establish the presence

of tribal communities in mainstream literature while also preserving their traditional practices and cultural heritage. However, many tribal narratives remain documented only in regional languages, which limits their accessibility and wider recognition. Additionally, insufficient institutional support, limited publication, and the lack of translation had slowed the growth and visibility of tribal literature. Although significant scholarly works on folk literature and tribal marginalization exists, there remains a research gap in the critical analysis of socio-political realities represented in tribal narratives. Therefore, a focused study on the Asur community with respect to self-representation, eco-consciousness, and resistance narratives would make a valuable contribution in tribal literary scholarship.

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