

Study of Supernatural World in *The Mysterious Ailments of Rupi Baskey* and *When the River Sleeps*

Dr. Mayank Ranjan

Associate Professor, Department of English Studies, Central University of Jharkhand,
Ranchi-835222

***Dr. Ranjit Kumar**

Associate Professor, Department of English Studies, Central University of Jharkhand,
Ranchi-835222

***Corresponding Author:**reach_ranjiii@yahoo.co.in

Abstract

Hansda Sowvendra Shekhar's *Mysterious Ailments of RupiBaskey* and EasterineKire's *When The River Sleeps* have introduced their readers to the world of supernatural, mysterious and fantasy which is a characteristic features of the tribes viz. santhal and angami respectively. This article endeavours to analyse and interpret those unrealistic world depicted in the two novels through the lens of magic realism. Further, the present article contains a detailed analysis of myths, folktales, folklores and overall lifestyle of the 'Santhal' and 'Angami' tribal communities.

Despite being identifiably different from one another there has been the tendency to put them under the same category and often their identities are dismissed or only limited. These tribes have histories which is still unregistered, they have their own literature, which is yet to be recognised, their culture and tradition varies significantly from one tribe to another, but we never acknowledge this difference. The world is unknown to these visible yet hidden gems of the society and is in fact unbothered by their ignorance towards them (tribals). When their world is examined carefully, we find how central population has pushed them to the margins and forced them to live on the margins.

Key words:supernatural, mysterious, ailment, santhal, angamis, tribes, myths, folktales, magic realism.

Article:-

Writers of the north-east such as Mamang Dai, Eastarinekiere etc. have effectively carried their voices of concern and brought the tribal issues of north-eastern regional tribal identity, tribal existence into the mainstream writings. Many of them are now well acclaimed writers of national and international repute. However, writers of tribal origin of Jharkhand have not gained enough attention and there are very few of them who write in English. Hansda Sowender Shekhar is one such writer who has gained prominent in the recent years. So far, it has largely been the voices from the north-east region that has found conspicuous place wherein life and culture of indigenous people have found their representations.

The novel ostensibly is the first work in English from Jharkhand written on the tribal subject of santhal. This work is a representative of santhal culture and is published by a renowned mainstream publisher. Right after its publication, Hansda was immediately shot into fame and won *sahitya academy vapuraskar* in 2014. This would surely invite voices from other tribal communities of Jharkhand and act as an inspiration and pave for other writers from the region. The novel addresses many grappling issues of tribal people plaguing their lives which include tribal identity, history, government apathy and exploitation, education, unemployment and tribal culture. The novel foregrounds the tribal culture and their sensibilities in the most forceful and effective manner. It is one of the most forceful expression that comes from tribal area of Jharkhand. In one of the interview, Sowender himself agrees that "RupiBaskey is the first full-fledged Santhal novel written in English, and published by a mainstream publisher like Aleph Book Company. I think this is a huge enough representation of the Santhal life in the mainstream Indian English writing. And I think this is good. There should be more Santhal stories told in English now" (Prasad, 2017). His next novel *Adivasi will Not Dance*, right after the publication was accused of defaming Adivasi culture and particularly santhali women and therefore was banned. However, the ban was lifted in the year Being the Doctor himself and belonging to the place called ghatshila, RupiBaskey is the faithful renderings of the lives of santhali people including their belief system and culture.

The novel begins during the 1950s during the pre-independence era and ends around the year 2001 when state of Jharkhand was created. So far it was the writer who had been writing about this community was an outsider but here we have for the first time here, the writer who is writing about his own Adivasi community, their prevailing beliefs, myths, superstitions which prevailed in different generation.

Mysterious ailments of RupiBaskey is replete with supernatural events and the tool of magical realism can be effectively used to explore the realities of characters or communities who are outside of the objective mainstream of our culture. It's not just South Americans, Indians, or African slaves who may offer these alternative views. Religious believers for whom the numinous is always present and miracles are right around the corner, believers to whom angels really do appear and to whom God reveals Himself directly, they too inhabit a magical realist reality. This chapter investigates the tribal myths and folktales under the lens of magical realism to understand the cultural and traditional practises of the tribal communities from a different perspective. By applying 'Magical Realism' to examine the mysterious and seemingly unnatural incidents in the stories we may give these myths and folktales a new dimension of exploration. Just as the fantastic and magical elements are presented as normal, the standard structure of reality is put into question. Essentially, magical realism is a chance for authors to show an alternative to an accepted reality, which can be an incredibly powerful tool against political regimes. For this purpose, properties of 'MagicalRealism' have been incorporated to examine the supernatural aspects of the plot in *The Mysterious Ailment of RupiBaskey* (HansdaSowvendra Shekhar) and *When the River sleeps* (EasterineKire), including the popular myths, divine creatures and spirits, folktales and folklores and other paranormal and mystical events recurring throughout the story. *When the River Sleeps* can be investigated as a work of magical realism, as she draws upon the Angami/Naga folklore and myths and has integrated these elements in the novel. Magical realism does not necessarily act as a means of addressing issues of colonisation alone, but it lends voice to the cultural systems that are buried until now and thereby sheds light on localized history. Nagaland, which is a part of the NorthEast India, is home to varied tribes who share a rich cultural history and a tradition of oral storytelling. Myths and legends abound in the stories that are transmitted orally, and this influence particularly serves as a dominant feature in Kire's works. Written in 2014, *When the River Sleeps* by EasterineKire is a story of- "a lone hunter, Vilie who sets out to find the river of his dreams: to wrest from its sleeping waters a stone that will give him untold power. It is a dangerous quest, for not only must he overcome unquiet spirits, vengeful sorceresses and demons of the forest, there are men – armed with guns – on his trail. who ventures out to find the magical stone from the sleeping river" (Kire 71). This book is about the forest tradition and myths that centre on the territories of Nagaland. The lively description of the nature and the life of forest dwellers make the narration more interesting. As the story moves deeper, one gets enchanted by the supernatural elements portrayed in the novel. The supernatural phenomena are abundant throughout the tale. This novel is an enlarged form of Naga folktales which is rich in its mythical beliefs. The novel starts with Vilie dreaming of the sleeping river and the heart stone which itself is a legend. It is believed that the heart stone can grant anything one asks for, it can be cattle, prowess in war, or success in the hunt. As the novel progresses, we are introduced to various deities, spirits, rituals, and beliefs, which together affect the thoughts and actions of the Naga people. The story first introduces the existence of the spirits through Mechuseno, who was a girl whom Vilie liked once. She died due to some supernatural causes, that is, after encountering a spirit. It so happened that one summer evening after plucking orchids from a tree when Seno accompanied by her friends was on her way to home, she kept complaining- "that a tall, dark man had climbed down the tree and was following them home She kept looking back in fear. Her companions saw nothing at all. At the village gate they parted; Seno went home to her parents and was racked by a terrible fever in the evening. The fever would not leave her and on the third day she told those tending to her that the man from the tree was sitting by her bed." (Kire14) "Seno was buried outside the village gate because she had died in what were considered 'ominous circumstances' " After this we find Vilie treating the forest as his refuge, "the forest is my wife", he often said, and it was indeed the forest that not only sustained him but also saved him from every danger. Here, Vilie represents what forest means to the indigenous people.

The relationship they share becomes more evident when we come to know about the ritual of thanksgiving or showing gratitude towards nature and the birth spirit for everything it gives us. As he starts his journey to the sleeping river through the forest, we can witness various interesting events taking place which seem impossible or unnatural. But they constitute an important part of Naga life and their belief system. One among such event is the appearance of weretiger. While Vilie was asleep under a shed he found in the forest after covering a good distance, he wakes up to a sound of an animal. Knowing that the tiger has crashed into the door he shoots off a bullet and it escapes but only to return later. Now Vilie knows that it is not a normal tiger but a weretiger. He remembers the closely guarded folk practise of men transforming their spirits into tigers. He then calls out the names of those people he knew were transformed into tigers and introduces himself and sees the tiger retreating. Those men whose spirits were metamorphosed into tigers, known as 'tekhumiavi' or weretiger, goes through a

long process starting as a smaller animal before reaching their final stage of weretiger. It was a closely guarded ritual of the Angami Nagas "As he lay there – his heart still pounding loudly in his chest – he stared into the darkness struck with wonder at the fierce strangeness of the

weretiger or tekhumiaivil as these beasts were called. The men whose spirits had metamorphosed into tigers. He remembered being told that it was by a long process that they reached their final stage of weretigerhood. Legend said that every weretiger began as a smaller animal, possibly a wildcat." (Kire35) This belief system in the ability of men and women to transform their spirits into certain animals and birds like tigers, snakes and eagles is deeply rooted in Naga folklore and serves as a link to cultural history. Vilie hesitates to kill the were tiger knowing that he will be harming a man because he had often been told by his elders when he was young about the existence of such spirit animals. This is not an isolated event but throughout the novel we come across incidents involving spirits, benevolent as well as malevolent. Then Vilie's journey takes us to the unclean forest or 'Rarhuria', which was believed to be spirit infested place and was avoided by people. People fall sick when they wander into these unclean forests and to cure them the seer gives a drink of ginseng and nutgall tree. "It was indeed the Rarhuria, the unclean forest feared by all who knew of it. The interior of the forest was dark and dank. Those who unknowingly wandered into the Rarhuriacomplained of fever and headaches afterwards. there were enough cases of fever to warrant labelling the rainforest an unclean area in village terminology. People studiously avoided coming near the forest." (Kire57) Vilie also falls sick while in the unclean forest and becomes very weak. In another unclean forest encounter, Vilie witnesses a reflection of a young girl's face in a pool of water, which he is sure is not a human but a spirit dwelling in the forest. Next, he meets a spirit which attacks him. He feels his end is near him but remembers the words of the seer- "Vilie suddenly remembered the seer's words. Let your spirit be the bigger one. they are spirits, they will submit to the authority of the spirit that asserts itself." (Kire88) He does that, crying "mine is the greater spirit! I will never submit to you!" (Kire 88) and the spirit gets smaller and could not injure him. At this point the description of the spirit by Vilie paints a clear yet distorted picture of the spirit for the readers "The thing lay where it had fallen as though wounded and defeated. It had no human shape. It was as misshapen as a hunchback but had no face to it. Vilie shouted at it to reveal itself and answer his questions, but it seemed incapable of doing that. While confronting the spirit Vilie asserts himself as a superior and brave spirit which helps him in defeating the spirit by shrinking him "Then get out of here before I harm you!" Vilie shouted again and the thing grew smaller and smaller until it was just barely visible. then it flung itself against a tree-trunk and stayed pasted to it, no bigger than a beetle. Vilie found he had no more interest in it." (Kire) This event of spirit shrinking is also found in Stephen King's work "It" more specifically in its movie adaptation as It chapter 2, in which towards the end, Pennywise is defeated by the loser's club when they are reminded of the fact that Pennywise is only as strong as his circumstances allow. If he's in a small room, he becomes small. And if his victim believes him to be powerless, he will become powerless. And so, the group figures out that their best bet is, essentially, to bully the bully: They mock Pennywise, telling him he isn't scary. Humiliated, Pennywise begins to shrink, transforming into an almost Benjamin Button-like, melted clown-baby. "His pout and his pleading eyes border on comical, accentuating just how powerless he has become." (Bradley 48) Instances such as these are suggestive of the fact one must have utmost faith in oneself, and they can solve any problem, come what may. Because, in both these instances we find that in order to defeat something that was beyond their physical strength, the protagonists had to first, put all the trust in themselves and then believe that the thing in front of them was only as strong as they allowed it to be in their minds. Another interesting episode of the novel is when Viliefinally reaches the sleeping river accompanied by Kani. There, they encountered with the spirit women who guarded the river. They saw the women walking down to the river and coming back to the bank. And then they walked back chanting, which Vilie felt was haunting and resembled the funeral chants. "In the half-light it was difficult to make out whether they were human or not, but Vilie was quite sure that there could be nothing human about the basket-carrying, black-clad figures retreating up the hillside. there was something so forbidding about them; both in the chanting that so strongly resembled funeral chants and in the stern way they held themselves as they walked in file back to wherever they had their bleak lodgings" (Kire74) Then the widow women spirits disappeared behind the hills and the river went to sleep and this is when Vilie went into the river and grabs the heart stone. However, it was not easy to come out of the river as he had to fight for a long time to come back alive and even when he was out of it both he and Kani were chased by the widow spirits. "they heard different sounds behind them: first, it was the cackling of old, old women, the sound of malicious victory. that was followed by laughter, the gurgling laughter of babies and children, innocent and enticing, urging them to look back. As the men carried on running, the laughter turned to high pitched shrieks as the widow-women spirits tried to threaten and frighten the two men." (Kire 47) After a nerve wrecking chase sequence, the widow spirit finally quit following, only after, Kani and Vilie crossed the border village and Kani shouted "Kepenuopfuzanutsie la mhatalie!" (In the name of the creator deity retreat) and the evil sounds stopped abruptly. Once again by invoking the name of the supreme Creator, the evil spirits are vanquished. Kire reconstructs the connection between the spirit world and the physical world, highlighting their coexistence and man's inevitable place "in-between". The emphasis remains

on Vilie's personal realisation of his spiritual journey as he struggles against not only the evil of men but malicious spirits as well. Again, his journey back with the heart stone to his home was yet another adventure. Now he meets spirit women in the market whom he successfully avoids as advised by an old man. After parting from the old man, Vilie reaches a village where the only inhabitants are women, and he wonders at the strangeness of it. He is welcomed by a woman named Ate who invites him to her house, although her sister Zote shows no signs of friendliness. He learns from Ate that it is the village of "Kirhupfũmia"; the Angami/Nagas believe that there are certain females who possess evil powers and are therefore treated as outcasts in society. Zote harbours a deep resentment against her ancestral village because of their mistreatment against her when she and

Ate were both young and the thirst for revenge burns deep in her core. This leads her to forcefully taking the "heartstone" in order to increase her powers and she sets forth on exacting her revenge against the village. Although Vilie and Ate follow closely behind, there is nothing that they can do as they watch helpless when she pours down curses and pestilence on the village that caused her sorrow and pain. After the village is burned to the ground and the villagers killed, Zote incurs the wrath of the 'Ancestor spirits' who rise from the flames and administer "their ghastly justice" This tragic incident which has been brought about using evil powers leads to realistic consequences, in the death of the inhabitants of an entire village and the death of the perpetrator herself. Kire's magical realism is intertwined with customary beliefs and universal acceptance with what is considered as good and evil, after all the justice systems of any society aims in punishing criminals and protecting themselves against "evil doers" After leaving the village Vilie takes on the role of a guardian to Ate and takes her with him on his journey back to his village. As they travel through the forests, Vilie's "spirit self" is once again put to the test when Ate is attacked by a "were-tiger", Vilie once again remembers the words of the wise seer: "Sometimes the struggle is not against flesh and blood, but against spiritual powers which you would be quite foolish to defy with gunpowder" When Ate's wound turns fatal and Vilie is left helpless as he tries to revive Ate, it is then that he takes the "heart-stone" and uses its powers for the first time to bring life back to Ate's cold, stiff body. Vilie takes the "heart-stone" and shouts "Sky is my father, Earth is my mother, Kepenuopfũ fights for me!

Take your hands off her!" He places the "heart-stone" in Ate's palm, finding himself despondent at the failure to revive her despite the arduous battle against the evil spirits. but then, Ate regains consciousness. The other magical thing was that Ate's wounds had been completely healed and there were only scars left, it was as if the encounter with the tiger never happened and what Vilie went through was simply a nightmare. It was almost like a reversal of time, the past and present indistinguishable, and what was real and not real highly doubtful, except for the scars that remained on Ate's shoulder. Vilie and Ate then finally arrive the settlement in the forest where Vilie lived, only to find his neighbours Krishna and his wife murdered and their child abandoned. Vilie is grief stricken at the situation and finds himself helpless to do anything about the tragedy. They take care of the abandoned child and much to Ate's surprise, she learns that her touch does not harm the baby at all and her fear of being the cursed "Kirhupfũmia" is allayed. Ultimately, they reach Vilie's village where they are welcomed heartily by his kinsman, Ate decides to stay on with Vilie's aunt with the baby where she is given a new lease on her life and Vilie returns to his hut in the settlement. But before he leaves, he bestows the "heart-stone" to Ate because the knowledge he gained from the charmed stone was inscribed in his heart and Ate with her pure heart deserved to be the keeper now. The story ends with yet another magically mysterious incident where Vilie encounters the actual murderer of Krishna and his wife, who first tries to buy the heart stone and then attempts to forcefully acquire it by attacking Vilie and before Vilie could grab his gun, the stranger pounces on him and stabs him repeatedly with a dagger when, suddenly the "were-tiger" appears from the forest and attacks the stranger, clawing him to death. This unexpected attack by the "were-tiger" remains unexplained and one can only conclude that Vilie's spirit was stronger than he realised which summoned the "were-tiger" to his aid. "The stone is not an object of worship. that is the mistake many people make with it. It is not for making profit for oneself. Before his journey, Vilie kept dreaming repeatedly that he was at the sleeping river plucking the stone from the river water. He felt sure he was destined to get the stone, and that was why he went on the journey, and he did find the river and the heart-stone. The wisdom of the stone is more spiritual than physical. It helps us discover the spiritual identity that is within us, so we can use it to combat the dark forces that are always trying to control and suppress us. But men who are not initiated don't understand this about the stone and they try to use it to gain wealth and other material things. Vilie was already using the stone on our journey back here. I mean he was using the knowledge he had gotten from his adventure with the stone." (Kire 56) Kire's narrative skilfully blends the magical and the ordinary events with her detailed accounts of the

phenomenon that it exceeds the boundaries of myths. The plot primarily focuses on Vilie's quest, and the action builds up through the interweaving of the mythical and the cultural context on which it rests. Vilie's disappearance in the end, which remains unexplained, raises certain questions, and doubts as to whether he has entered the spirit world because of his ever-growing knowledge about its powers and spells and through this paradigm Kire merges the realms of the magical and the real. (Akangsenla 5) After analysing When The River Sleeps under the lens of magical realism, we can somewhat interpret the simple yet very complex world of the tribal communities. The culture and traditions of tribal people holds an extremely powerful narrative which is

not only revered but also followed by the people very passionately, not because it is something that they have grown up, with and around, but because it is the foundation of their entire belief system. Ville's journey to and from the sleeping river is full of life lessons that have been woven with the fine threads of folk lore, local customs, and rituals. Nagaland's customs, rituals, folklores, their closeknit communities, and nature centric lifestyle has come alive in Ville's story. This book opens the door to a magical world where men live their lives in perfect harmony with nature, surrounded by its bounty. When *The River Sleeps* allows its readers to look at the tribal world from a whole new perspective which is different from other stories which portray these communities as mere victims and always associate them with wars and insurgencies. Magical Realism in Hansda Sowvendra Shekhar's debut novel, *The Mysterious Ailment of Rupi Baskey* (2014) is a unique blend of supernatural elements with

the nature, around which is the intricately woven lives of the Santhal tribe. With special emphasis on the witchcraft practises by Santhal women which is popularly known as "dahni-bidya" in the Santhal community, Sowvendra has also expressed the magical aspects of the tribal folktales and traditions where we can find supernatural creatures like "Sima-Bonga bhoot", tales of the 'seven sisters of the lake' and many such instances which forces the readers to actually question their beliefs and start anew with the newly introduced mystical realm of the tribal world. The novel begins with an invocation to the Santhal deities- "Marang-Buru hirla, Jaher-Ayo hirla Bonga-buruar Hapram-ko lagid, Ar Baba-Bo-Bitilagid" The story moves forward and backward in time with fluidity. This is a story about the place Kadamdihi with no kadam trees. It is the story about "the strongest woman of Kadamdihi" who suffers from a mysterious ailment. Though mystery of Rupi's ailment is never disclosed, the story reveals many facets of the lives of the Santhal people and their culture. The novel is bold in depicting the supernatural beliefs and rituals of the tribal community in a matter-of-fact manner. The story is set up in a village near Jharkhand; West Bengal border named Kadamdihi is about the Baskey family. The story begins with Rupi Baskey giving birth to her first child Jaipal while working in the paddy fields. Rupi is the wife of Sido, who is the eldest son of Khorda-haram, a respectable man of the village. Khorda-haram is the sole person who was able to hold the village and its inhabitants together. He was responsible for organizing various festivals and taking important decisions for his community (Santhals) and the village. Putki is Khorda-haram's wife, and she has a past and present of her own. She is an alcoholic and was an object of fantasy of many men of Kadamdihi and nearby villages when she was young. Putki & Khorda have two sons, Sodo & Diso. Sodo is a well-educated man and is a teacher. He teaches in a government school in the nearby village of Nitra and is married to Rupi. Soon after Rupi gives birth to her first child Jaipal, her neighbour Gurubari who is allegedly having an affair with Sido gives her an ailment through some black magic. Rupi, who was touted as one of the strongest women of the village turns into a weak, frail woman who lives out her days lying on a cot in the backyard of her house watching her world falling apart. The story also focuses on three generations of Baskeys and their lives along with the regular life of the people of Kadamdihi. The author vividly paints a picture through his words about all the good and bad happenings in the village and the lives of its inhabitants. Human relationships and its intricacies along with old-age notions about the good and the evil form the base of the story. The author has done a fine job in putting everything together and takes the readers to the tribal areas of Jharkhand. It is a strong and bold attempt to showcase the life of tribal people and myths and beliefs they live with. (Gupta 64) Exploring the novel through magical realism, we discover a new dimension of the Santhal tribal folktales and traditions it also helps in developing a new perspective of the tribal people, which is rather astonishing. As opposed to the stereotypical notion of looking at the tribal communities, as primitive and backward, this story urges the readers to break the hollow shell of age-old point of view and step into the mystical realm of these traditions and cultures, which strongly adheres these tribal communities and its people together. These communities live in a very close proximity with the nature, and some understand the nature way better than many experts. This is magical in itself that, these people who have always been looked down upon as primitives, have a plethora of knowledge about so many complex phenomena of the nature, that which is learnt and researched in textbooks are already on the tips of their fingertips of the tribal people, already in practise and as a part of their undeniable ancestral history. The first element of magical realism in "Mysterious Ailments of Rupi Baskey" is encountered when we learn the power of those magical words, "Jeeveketetaam, baahu" which "Dhai-budhi" whispers in the ears of Somai-budhi after her miscarriage and just like that "the pain inside her womb drift away with large teardrops that rolled in a silent, continuous stream from her eyes. After those words she heard nothing more.

Older Somai-budhi gave in to the fatigue of parturition and drifted off into a deep, undisturbed sleep." (shekhar) Moving ahead in the story we are introduced to the supernatural creature, "Sima-Bonga". In Santhal tribal community, people worship the nature and to represent nature as their deity they set up the shrine of Marangburu and Jaher-Ayo, which is considered as the holiest spot in the jaher, the place where the sacrifices are made during Baha- the spring festival-and Maak-Moray. However, besides shrines of Marang-Buru and JaherAyo there are five more shrines- "To the right of Marang-Buru and Jaher-Ayo stood the shrine of feminine power, of fertility. On the left stood the Five Great Warriors, theory-Ko. The shrine of masculine power. In front of Marang-Buru and Jaher-Ayo was the shrine of Dharma. These four shrines were marked by bamboo stick

fixed in earth and a mound build up at the base of each.” (Shekhar) After the fourth shrine comes the fifth shrine which belonged to ‘Sima-Bonga’, while the other gods represent positive energy, Sima-Bonga symbolises the negate forces. It causes , infirmity, poverty, doom and, finally, death. In order to keep the village safe from its evil influence, Sima-Bonga, too, must be paid obeisance along with other deities. However, Sia-Bonga is said to bring easy wealth to those who appease it. Hence it is also called “Dhonkundra-bhoot” but, it extracts a heavy price for its favours. People who maintain it usually suffer strange, incurable illness. Also, there is the shrill, annoying almost maddening cry of Dhonkundra-bhoot which its tamer must endure. It is said those who appease this bhoot hear its cries all the time and eventually lose their minds. Yet, the lure of easy wealth compels people to tame Sima-Bonga. This supernatural creature makes his appearance in the plot several times but the most delightful of which was his encounter with ‘Della’. The Dhonkundra-bhoot made its presence felt to her several times, and every visit had ended in disaster. But for the bhoot, not the fearless Della. As the story progresses, we are introduced to the central idea of this book which is witchcraft or “dahni-bidya” as it is identified by the Santhal community. There is a beautiful description of the dreadful yet very amusing ritual which is practised by the Santhal women to ignite the supernatural power through Dahni-Bidya.

There is a picturesque portrayal of how the some Santhal, Kamar and Kunkal women would gather on certain ‘Konami nights’, all barriers of religions and prejudices of community would be forgotten. “They would meet in the bamboo thicket outside the village, roam the banks of the Kadamdihi stream, ritually suck the life out of humans and animals and, in the absence of prey, devour human or animal dung. They would conjure up balls of fire the size of rice pots, host the Bhaatu-their master, their sacred tiger-comb rheBhaatu’s fur, plan sacrifices, carry the out, and the euphoric dance of oneness with their power.” (Shekhar 63) Witchcraft shows up here in common ways but also in a peculiar form that catches the attention of the reader: feminine, vengeance, an old treat that operates against rivals and violent man. Hansda is not just narrating the life of a woman (and her village, and her people):he’s using everything that happens in the little hells of rural life to express love, sadness, frustration, envy and solidarity. The usual skeleton of daily life. “Santhal men drink haandi, santhal women practise dahnibidya, and no one speaks about it. It is as natural as the wind blowing through the trees in Sarjom grove, as water flowing in the Kadamdihi stream.” (Shekhar 67) The women in the story who are portrayed as practicing Dahni-Bidya are Naikay’s wife and Daughter-in-law, majhi’s wife, Dulari and of course Rupi’s nemesis in disguise Gurubari. All these women are presented as practicing witchcraft for some or the other negative emotion. And it is through Rupi’s encounter with each of them at different instances that we come to know about the different ways in which each of them operates and practise their art. Naikay’s wife and daughter-in law are mainly driven by greed and by jealousy towards the Somaiharam’s(majhi) family. This is shown in the incidents where Somi-budhi experiences multiple miscarriages after having a nightmare about a large woman with dreadful appearance and seemingly maliciously intention towards her. This woman is later identified as Naikay’s wife as she is known to be practicing Dahni-bidya and later Somai-haram experiences same sort of dream repetitively and then during her fourth pregnancy at the time of delivery, Somai-budhi passes away. Naikay’s daughter in law tries to entice Rupi one time while she was brooming outside the house. However, she is saved by Sonamuni (the widowed cousin of Khorda) when she interrupts in between and takes Rupi away and warns her to maintain a safe distance from

Naikay’s family. Amongst all these was the prime nemesis of Rupi, Gurbari who not only gave Rupi the mysterious incurable ailment but also took away her first born Jaipal and even deprived her from the love of her husband, Sido. All of this started when Rupi went to Nitra with Sido and met Gurubari. However, we see that Rupi was warned on her first day at Nitra, by a woman, who smelled like jasmine and wore white saree and had rough white hair, she suggested to “Get your own kitchen. A separate kitchen” She was later revealed to be majhi’sauntin-law who practised “Dahni-bidya” who had long been dead, and who guided majhi’swife and Gurbari in aspects of witchcraft. She warned Rupi about getting a separate kitchen because it was most likely that Gurubari would use “Mohni-medicine” to entice Rupi and to make her obey her so that she won’t be a hurdle between her and Sido. Later this is substantiated by the incident where Gurubari offers Rupi to taste ‘arakkohra’ which Rupi refuse to eat but later ‘Rupi licked the bowl clean’ after Gurubari looked at her in her eyes with desperation. “ ‘What happened?’Gurubari grabbed Rupi’s hand. Look at me.’ Rupi turned her head towards Gurubari like she was a marionette and Gurubari held her strings.” (Shekhar 36)

“Mohni medicine: the concoction which is prepared from the pith of the banana tree. This compound is perfect for whoever wants to seduce or influence another. If a woman in love with an indifferent man feeds it to him, he will fall in love with her. If a man burning with vengeance feeds it to his enemy, that enemy will die a miserable death. The only trick is that the medicine must be mixed with the food of the victim.” (Shekhar 38) Another example of the use of ‘mohni medicine’ is observed when Dulari started practising witchcraft because of which wild and violent Doso is seen being changed into a docile household man, who inherently obeys Dulari and her orders. In fact, Dulari uses “Dahni-bidya” to execute that love fling of Doso who was exclaimed as “Kharya girl”, who was found dead one morning. As result of witchcraft practises Dulari became the strongest woman in Kadamdihi. Dulari’s power came from the knowledge she had received from her cousins in her father’s village, the knowledge which made her capable of controlling people by using charms. Dulari was tired of the beatings,

thrashings, and humiliation Doso was inflicting upon her and so, she sought refuge in witchcraft to empower herself somehow and fight her battle. Her argument to this was the fact that the ones who didn't come to her rescue while she was being exploited, has no right to teach her the difference between the right and wrong ways. She was now a new woman with power of witchcraft. However, she went way too far with her powers once, when she used it on Singo, a limping girl who was seen running like a sprinter across the fields. Nobody knew why she targeted her, some said she was resentful of Singo's youth, her vivacity, and her bright smile. While others said that she was simply testing the effect and extent of her powers. Whatever was her reason the result was public humiliation of an innocent girl. There weren't just dahin and Sima-Bonga in the story. Sowvendra made sure to mention all the popular myths and folktales of Santhali community through the magnificent story of Rupi. Amongst these were the legends about "Jugni- spirit", a ravishingly beautiful spirit who was said to cause disease, lived under the Taalay tree. She roamed naked on top of the putur-dungri, her long, unkempt hair sweeping the ground gave her fierce but enticing appearance, so enigmatic that even young boys were drawn to her. She would tend to her stock of onions, garlic, and ginger which she dried on sarjomleaves under strong sun. One particular incident of jugni spirit that is mentioned in the story tells us how, when she picked up a handful of garlic and threw it in the direction of Salbuni, the next morning five men of Salbuni had died due to severe diarrhoea and vomiting. This incident in itself can be a full-length story about Jugni-spirit and its fearsome powers. The Jugni- spirit, a supernatural character, is an undeniably integral part of the ever so rich tradition and culture of Santhali community. But Jugni is not the only spirit that we come across, Sowvendra also introduces his readers to the tale of "the Saat-Bohoni", the seven sisters who live in the depths of stagnant ponds. The Saat-Bohoni are the goddesses of ponds and lakes. It is said that their feet are turned backwards, and they keep an eye out for all the young men who come to bathe. If they happen to find one attractive, they drag hi to the depths of pond. They sit the young man on a gaando of coiled serpents and feed him tabeen made of dried gooseberry leaves. Then they make him their consort and seduce him so that he is forced to make love to all seven of them one after the other. The day after, the man's soulless body emerges from the depths of the pond and floats on its surface." (shekhar) The legend of SaatBohoni is so popular amongst the Santhali tribe that, we can find a popular Santhali movie which was created on the same concept named Saatbohini(2021) directed by Surendra Tudu. The movie was received very well by the natives as well as non-natives, as it discusses one of the core beliefs of the tribal community and successfully engages the audiences with the fascinating representation. These folktales and myths are what have been there in the community since ancient times and the people of the tribe grow up listening, experiencing and thereby learning from these legendary folktales and myths. It is not a fable, or a story, it is an integral part of the tradition and culture of these tribal communities, which is so rich and profound that superficial readings into it will never allow to comprehend its true essence. The Mysterious Ailment of RupiBaskey is not an ordinary story about the struggles and hardships of the protagonists rather it is a work of art, that compels its readers to look at a society which is proclaimed as savage, primitive and victim of the time, in a new light. Where, we discover the richness of this ever so beautiful world of Santhal tribe, which is embellished with the intricately woven masterpieces of folktales and myths. While exploring the work through the lens of magical realism, one may choose to believe these supernatural elements of the tribal community or simply discard it as a work of creative fictional writing, but one thing that one possibly can't do is, leave the book without getting lost in the spiralling and ever engaging thoughts about the ways in which these tribes and its people conduct their daily lives and live within a wonderful world of mythical elements which is so close to nature that the urban life can never offer us to be in. It offers the readers to wander in a world where there is magic in words, in rivers, in trees, even in hypnotising eyes. It is a world brimming over with magically mythical and supernatural elements. All we need to do is take a leap of faith and we'll find ourselves in the arms of an enigmatically wonderful world which welcomes us to experience and learn the nuances of a life embraced by nature.

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