

Negotiating Two Worlds: Tribal Roots and Urban Alienation in Hansda Sowvendra Shekhar's *My Father's Garden*

First Author: Dilshad Ali

Research Scholar, Department of English and Foreign Languages
Maharshi Dayanand University, Rohtak (Haryana)

Email: faradrikdilshad29@gmail.com

Reg. no. 1818130038

Second Author: Dr Kavita

Assistant Professor, Maharshi Dayanand University, Rohtak (Haryana)

Email: kavita.eng@mdurohtak.ac.in

Abstract

My Father's Garden (2018) by Hansda Sowvendra Shekhar is a profound exploration of identity, memory, and longing. The novel is divided into three parts: "Lover," "Friend," and "Father." It follows the life of an unknown Santhal protagonist as he moves from his Adivasi homeland in Jharkhand to cities like Lucknow and Jamshedpur. The present research article explores the tension between tribal rootedness and urban alienation, examining how migration, sexuality, and contemporary aspirations influence the protagonist's sense of belonging. This research article uses postcolonial concepts of hybridity, intersectionality, and indigenous studies to elucidate how Shekhar navigates traditional roots and urban existence.

Keywords

Tribal roots, urban alienation, queer identity, reconciliation.

Introduction

Hansda Sowvendra Shekhar (born 1983) is one of the most unique modern writers in Indian English literature. Shekhar is a medical doctor by profession and a member of the Santhal tribe in Jharkhand. He writes fiction that gives readers an insider's look at tribal life rarely found in mainstream Indian writing. His works, including the award-winning short story collection *The Adivasi Will Not Dance* (2015) and the novels *The Mysterious Ailment of Rupi Baskey* (2014) and *My Father's Garden* (2018), focus on the daily lives, problems, and strengths of tribal communities.

Hansda Sowvendra Shekhar broadened the scope of Indian English literature by including tribal experiences, voices, and landscapes, thereby challenging both mainstream dominance and urban middle-class narratives. His fiction is a fusion of modern narrative technique and oral tradition, with equal emphasis on intimate human relationships, contemporary politics, and folklore. He portrays tribal characters as intricate individuals rather than ethnographic anomalies, regardless of whether he is writing about displacement, land alienation, gender, or queer desire. Shekhar has helped to redefine the boundaries of postcolonial Indian literature by bringing the Santhal worldview into the national literary scene and addressing issues like sexuality, identity,

and ecological justice. This has created space for long-ignored indigenous perspectives and intersectional realities.

The novel *My Father's Garden* (2018) by Hansda Sowvendra Shekhar is a profoundly personal and multilayered work that explores the themes of desire, belonging, and identity. Nikhil Adsule writes in his article that reading "*My Father's Garden* . . . is a deeply inward-looking experience and unveils a different historical discussion of the marginalized strata as opposed from the mainstream, Brahmanic history with selective amnesia being taught in schools and colleges" ("A Brief Note on '*My Father's Garden*'"). It follows an unnamed Santhal protagonist from his rural infancy in Jharkhand to the various bustling cities. The novel is divided into three parts: "Lover," "Friend," and "Father." Shekhar explores the tension between the liberating freedom of urban life and the pull of ancestral roots, as well as the subtle strength of familial bonds and the intricacies of queer relationships. The novel's central motif is the father's carefully maintained garden which serves as a representation of cultural memory, rootedness, and resilience.

Queer Desire and the Alienated Self

Homosexuality in tribal societies should not be judged based on modern heteronormative morality. Various tribal communities accepted different sexual orientations as both natural and spiritually significant. Two-spirit people among Native Americans were considered to have both masculine and feminine qualities, and thus, they were the healers and the visionaries (Williams 42). Fa'afafine are the men in Samoa who take the feminine roles, and the society accepts them and appreciates their presence (Besnier 88). In the same way, Bugis in Indonesia identify five genders, with one of them being bissu, genderless priests who are the symbol of harmony (Davies 65). Several African tribes like the Azande, Nandi, and Lovedu not only practised same-sex relationships but also had "female husbands" as a means of social integration and keeping their lineage going (Murray and Roscoe 133).

Different tribal societies in India hold varying opinions about same-sex relationships, with the culture of each community deeply influencing them. The Ho tribe of Jharkhand shows a somewhat accepting point of view of homosexuality. Studies have pointed out that among the Ho, male homosexuality has been socially recognised for a long time, and homosexual men—called Kothi-Panthis in the local language—are not looked down upon or excluded (Murty 83). In the case of the Ho people, sexual diversity is considered a purely natural part of one's personal identity and is not considered a moral deviation. On the other hand, the Santhal tribe, being one of the largest tribal communities in India, has a more closed stance that is mainly influenced by its focus on fertility, kinship, and maintaining social order. Ethnographic observations reveal that the Santhals not only forbid adultery but also homosexuality and see such acts as spiritual violations that bring the anger of ancestral spirits (Baa 2013). Their ban on these acts comes from their communal belief that sex is to be the means of the lineal and the social community balance. The difference between the Ho's acceptance and the Santhal's rejection of the issue provides an insight into the range of indigenous moral systems in India and shows that the impact of different religions and colonial rule has made these age-old views about sexuality and identity even more complex.

In *My Father's Garden*, Shekhar elaborates on this clash with amazing psychological depth. The narrator's sexual orientation serves as the arena for the internalised conflict between his tribal heritage and his urban-educated side. The Santhal world, being a community of the collective, naturally didn't have any space left for sexual individualism. His queerness alienated him from the community and the cultural myths that once unified his life. When he goes to the city to seek freedom, he encounters a new kind of oppression—urban elitism and caste-class hierarchies that make his tribal identity "other." Thus, his homosexuality becomes doubly stigmatised: as unnatural in his home world and as exotic or inferior in the cosmopolitan space.

Homosexuality in the novel also functions as a metaphor for modern tribal identity itself—fragmented, displaced, and struggling for recognition. The narrator's relations with men were kept secret, and he was ashamed of them, which corresponded to the moral anxieties of both tribal and mainstream Indian societies. However,

Shekhar does not portray homosexuality as a calamity; instead, it becomes an instrument to see how an individual's desire relates to the inherited morality. His desire for love and acceptance is a reflection of the Santhal people's desire for cultural dignity in a world that pushes them aside.

Both rootedness in tradition and estrangement from modernity define the life of the unnamed protagonist of *My Father's Garden*. Santi Ranjan Sing writes in his article titled “Queer, Caste and Identity: Contemplating Sexuality and Subalternity in Hansda S. Shekhar’s *My Father’s Garden*” that “The novel is a true to life picture of society concerning how does it sway one's behaviour when one is refused any self-expression and hypocrisy is sustained for the sake of custom or tradition. This ends up victimizing the character against the presumptions and expectations of society” (123). There are many forces that alienate him, but his homosexuality stands out as the most significant. It functions not only as a personal experience of love and longing but a metaphor for the fractured position that he occupies between two worlds. His sexual identity heightens his sense of unbelonging, detaching him both from his own community and from the urban space he seeks to inhabit. Qazi Mustabeen Noor writes in her article that,

Shekhar’s unnamed Santhali narrator is a conflicted, sensitive medical student whose coming-of-age requires him to navigate the uneasy complications of clashing intersections—same-sex love and desire for a captivating but condescending junior Samir, his subsequent lonely and alienated life as a doctor, bound to hide his Adivasi identity; and perennial ancestral burdens that clash with the personal and political. (“Desire, alienation, and masculinity”)

In the Santhal world of his upbringing, he inherits a culture that is defined by community relationships, oral traditions, and a deep relationship with the land. But, like in most tribal societies, it also insists on heteronormativity, where marriage and reproduction ensure continuity. In this setup, the narrator is unable to express his desires for men without fear of condemnation or rejection. His homosexuality quietly estranges him from his tribe; he believes that staying within that world would be the same as silencing a key part of his identity. This conflict between cultural identity and sexual orientation compels him to flee, but escape from reality does not assure acceptance in the outside world. On a train journey, the unnamed protagonist encounters a group of hijras (a socially marginalized community of transgender people in India), and one of them asks him, "Poora hai?" . . . They waved their hand vertically, twice, before my body, and asked again, ‘Sab poora hai? Complete hai? Kuch missing to nhi hai’ (Are you complete? Is everything whole? Nothing missing, right?) (*My Father’s Garden* 62). When the narrator responds nervously, “Na, na, kuch missing nahin hai. Sab complete hai”—it shows his anxiety and uncertainty. His outward assurance is meant as self-defense, but inwardly he questions his fractured identity; he admits, “I stood there wondering if everything was really complete, if I was whole” (ibid. 62). It situates the narrator’s sexuality in a ‘Third Space’—a concept introduced by Homi Bhabha in his critical book *The Location of Culture* (1994) where identity is not fixed but negotiated. It is an in-between space—neither entirely belonging to one side nor the other—where a new form of cultural meaning, identity, and subjectivity emerges. Bhabha writes,

The theoretical recognition of the split-space of enunciation may open the way to conceptualizing an international culture, based not on the exoticism of multiculturalism or the diversity of cultures, but on the inscription and articulation of culture's hybridity. It is the inbetween space that carries the burden of the meaning of culture, and by exploring this Third Space, we may elude the politics of polarity and emerge as the others of ourselves. (*The Location of Culture* 55)

This indicates that identities, even sexual ones, are not whole, pure, or stable; instead, they are hybrid, fragmented, and always changing. The hijra belongs to a marginalized culture that defies conventional gender roles. Although they are frequently referred to as "incomplete," but within cultural rituals they hold the spiritual

authority to confer blessings or question completeness. Because of this paradox, Bhabha's "third space," which challenges conventional notions of gender and sexuality, is embodied in the *hijras*.

These circumstances further alienate the narrator's homosexuality. It distinguishes him as someone who is unable to live up to the norm in his group. The LGBT+ community, often composed of individuals from upper-caste backgrounds with metropolitan privilege, typically does not accept voices from tribal communities, which results in a lack of belonging for these groups in the modern metropolis. He must constantly negotiate since he is stranded on the brink of two worlds. His sexuality is more than just a personal matter; it is a reflection of his overall condition as a tribal intellectual who finds solace neither in cosmopolitan modernity nor in deeply ingrained tradition (Priyanka Ghosh 29-30).

The psychological consequences of such a position are profound. According to the narrator, he can only be himself for brief moments when he is near another person. He must always wear masks in public. He constantly feels like he isn't getting enough attention and alternates between wanting to connect with people and accepting his loneliness. For him, homosexuality turns into a way of being "in between," a language of partial engagement. He says, "I was tortured by my inability to tell my parents about my choices, by the thought of the pain and disappointment I would cause them if I spoke the truth, by my inability to accept what I did not want to accept" (*My Father's Garden* 59-60). The alienation caused by his homosexuality is inseparable from the broader alienation that defines the narrator's life.

The urban environment of Shekhar's settings—navigating congested trains, faceless apartments, or luxurious malls—intensifies the concept of rootlessness that defines contemporary existence. The protagonist adeptly speaks the English language, engages with corporate culture, and connects with many communities across caste and class during colonialism, all while confronting the challenges of identity. His experience signifies an alienation that is both spatial and ontological. In simple words, he is not connected with either the rural village or urban lifestyle, nor with conventional heterosexual culture or the prominent LGBT+ population, which is largely upper-caste, metropolitan, and middle-class. Shriyanshi Shukla writes that:

. . . the tribal identity remains starkly impacted by the dual nature of coloniality. I claim it to be dual nature, as there are two kinds of colonialism that our tribal communities have faced—one with the English colonizers and the other with capitalist indigenous colonizers. . . . The unnamed narrator is very conscious about his identity as Santhal throughout the narrative but even more so conscious about his sexual identity, which does not adhere to heterosexual space in his home and other social spaces. This duality portrays the elemental aspect of alienation. Thus, in this manner the subjugation is doubled. ("Intersectional identities")

Hansda attempts to explore complex issues and provide a clear depiction of society, rather than offering a comforting or idealized view. The unnamed protagonist speaks a little later about how his lover Samir called him by pet names, which were four-lettered words, and this made him feel quite elated because he had "learned to find pleasure in self-abasement" (ibid. 11).

Tribal Roots and the Father's Legacy

The relationship between the father and son in Hansda Sowvendra Shekhar's *My Father's Garden* serves as the emotional center of the novel. Their connection goes beyond simply fulfilling their responsibilities; it involves the conflict arising from expectations and alienation. The unnamed protagonist of the novel feels detached from his father throughout a significant portion of the novel. This split is due to their silence, not a clear dispute. The son, caught between his tribal roots and the urban settings, becomes a symbol of displacement and restlessness, while the father represents rootedness and tradition.

The father's garden is a storehouse of indigenous knowledge and Santhal history in addition to being a piece of farmed land. It represents a communal, pre-capitalist lifestyle in which land serves as both identity and sustenance. The garden is a symbol of continuity for the main character because it connects him to his ancestors, who resisted colonial exploitation and modern dispossession.

The Santhal protagonist of *My Father's Garden* exists not entirely inside nor fully outside the world he navigates. Born in a rural Santhal village, he inherits a legacy of land, language, and communal traditions. His schooling and career advance him into urban India, where caste hierarchies, professional aspirations, and queer desire confuse his identity. Shekhar employs the symbol of the 'garden' to illustrate how the protagonist's identity is rooted in his father's land yet dispersed throughout the urban concrete landscapes of modern cities. However, this feeling of being rooted is followed by several fears. The protagonist understands that remaining in the village means limited opportunities and perpetual exclusion. His leaving represents both an evasion of destitution and a treachery against his heritage. Shekhar expresses this ambivalence through sensory details: the aroma of earth, the father's cultivation of flora, and the seasonal cycles that sharply contrast with the protagonist's life in anonymous urban settings. The garden becomes a metaphorical 'origin' that he carries as a memory but cannot fully inhabit. However, this very rootedness causes the son's quiet panic:

But every time I saw him, I would feel a quiet panic. I lacked the vocabulary, the courage and the cruelty I needed to tell him that I was not the son he expected me to be. And if I did, would he understand? Would my mother? (*My Father's Garden* 65)

In "Lover" and "Friend," the protagonist's move to the various cities like Lucknow, Jamshedpur, and Pakur that represents an assimilation into India's neoliberal middle class. He experiences dual marginalization as both a tribal and queer. His colleagues and social acquaintances sexualize him and alienate him from his tribal heritage, trivializing it as mere exotic curiosity or "backwardness." At the same time, his sexual identity is manifested through intricate interactions with males; hence, he is marginalized from the heteronormative frameworks of his native Santhal society while also being distanced from the urban bourgeois experience. In this context, the narrator stated, "My double life haunted every hour of my life" (*My Father's Garden* 65).

The idea of love for the family connects with the concepts of homosexuality and alienation. The father's garden symbolizes the silent demand for continuity—the expectation of marriage, heirs, and tradition—which the son cannot fulfill. His fear is not about his father's anger but about the impossibility of being understood.

Nevertheless, reconciliation comes not through confrontation but through acceptance of difference. The father does not question his son's choices directly; instead, he shows his love through quiet, unpretentious ways—working in the garden, maintaining the home, and sustaining life in small ways. The son, though unable to voice his truth, starts seeing the garden as a heritage of strength rather than being dominated. The garden is a symbol of survival and acceptance of difference, as well as a reminder of his failure to meet expectations.

This reconciliation is subtle and subdued. It doesn't revolve around the father explicitly accepting the son's homosexuality or urban estrangement. Instead, the protagonist realizes that his father's love was unconditional and shown through acts of care and labor. The garden is the place where the two worlds—tradition and modernity, silence and identity, alienation and belonging—come together.

Conclusion

To sum up, Hansda Sowvendra Shekhar's *My Father's Garden* is an emotionally powerful journey of the main character's experiences to find his identity, his feeling of being different, and his coming to terms with himself again. The main character is a Santhal, who is trying to reconcile the fact that he comes from a tribe but

is an urban queer. The relationship between the father and the son, which is represented through the ever-growing garden, is a metaphor of the bond that goes beyond time and is strong even in the face of social and emotional division. The son feels alienated because he struggles to conform to traditional and patriarchal expectations of masculinity and cultural norms. On the other hand, the father's calm demeanor and work in the garden can be considered an expression of love that goes beyond words and differences.

Thus, the novel challenges the binary notion of belonging and estrangement. Instead, it locates the reconciliation in what Homi Bhabha refers to as the "third space" that is neither a complete merger nor a total obliteration of the conflicting identities. By finding his father's garden again, the protagonist is able to see that he has the capacity to accept not only his father and his roots but also his complicated self. So Hansda Sowvendra Shekhar's *My Father's Garden* is not just a tale of one's struggle with oneself; it is a story of the healing process during which love, silence, and memory become the agents that bring about a new alliance between tradition and change.

Works Cited

Adsule, Nikhil SanjayRekha. "A Brief Note on 'My Father's Garden'." *Round Table India*, 28 February 2019. Accessed 27 Oct. 2025.

Baa, Roshan. "Tribal Philosophy." *Fikpani*, 2013. Accessed 4 Nov. 2025.

Bhabha, Homi K. *The Location of Culture*. Routledge, 1994.

Davies, Sharyn Graham. *Gender Diversity in Indonesia: Sexuality, Islam, and Queer Selves*. Routledge, 2010.

Ghosh, Priyanka. "An Account of Santhal Tribulation in My Father's Garden: A Subaltern Writes Back." *Journal of Adivasi and Indigenous Studies*, Vol. XIII, No. 1, February 2023.

Accessed 27 Oct. 2025

Murray, Stephen O., and Will Roscoe, editors. *Boy-Wives and Female Husbands: Studies in African Homosexualities*. Palgrave, 1998.

Noor, Qazi Mustabeen. "Desire, Alienation and Masculinity: Hansda Sowvendra Shekhar's fiery new novel displaces the canon." *Dhaka Tribune*, 24 Feb. 2019. Accessed 27 Oct. 2025.

Ranjan Sing, Santi. "Queer, Caste and Identity: Contemplating Sexuality and Subalternity in Hansda S. Shekhar's *My Father's Garden*." *The Creative Launcher*, vol. 6, no. 2, 2021.

DOI: <https://doi.org/10.53032/TCL.2021.6.2.17>

Shekhar, Hansda Sowvendra. *My Father's Garden*. Speaking Tiger, 2018.

Shukla, Shriyanshi. "Intersectional Identities—Book Review 'My Father's Garden' by Hansda Sowvendra Shekhar." *Counter Current.org*, 07 July 2020.

<https://countercurrents.org/2020/07/intersectional-identities-book-review-my-fathers-garden>

[en-by-hansda-sowvendra-shekhar/](https://countercurrents.org/2020/07/intersectional-identities-book-review-my-fathers-garden-by-hansda-sowvendra-shekhar/)

Sundharan, Surya. "Queerness in Tribal Societies." *St. Xavier's College Magazine*, 2019–20. <https://xaviers.ac/files/magazine/dpt/eidos/EIDOS%202019-20.pdf?utm>

Williams, Walter L. *The Spirit and the Flesh: Sexual Diversity in American Indian Culture*. Beacon Press, 1986.