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Extracting Indigeneity

Revaluing the Work of World Literature in These Times

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ABSTRACT: This essay examines extractivism as both a project and a process that is bolstering new forms of imperialism on a world scale. It argues that extractivism is as much grounded in material accumulation as it is in cultural extraction to create new forms of value. The writings of indigenous writers such as Hansda Sowvendra Shekhar offer an important key to understanding the work of the literary in making visible and resistant that which extractivism seeks to exploit for profit.

KEYWORDS: allegory; extractivism; indigeneity; world literature

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Extractivism has emerged as a new form of ecological imperialism truly graspable only on a world scale. Some go further to argue that it is ‘a constitutive feature of the current operations of capital.’¹ In its delimited sense it involves the extraction of ‘huge volumes of natural resources, which are not at all or only very partially processed and are mainly for export according to the demand of central countries.’²

* I would like to thank Francesco Giusti and Benjamin Lewis Robinson for inviting me to Berlin for their symposium on the Work of World Literature in June 2019, for their thoughtful comments on my paper and for all the practical help I have needed in getting this ready for publication.

- 1 Verónica Gago and Sandro Mezzadra, ‘A Critique of the Extractive Operations of Capital: Toward an Expanded Concept of Extractivism’, *Rethinking Marxism*, 29.4 (2017), pp. 574–59 (p. 579).
- 2 Alberto Acosta, ‘Después del saqueo: Caminos hacia el posextractivismo’, *Perspectivas, Análisis y Comentarios Políticos América Latina*, 1 (2015), pp. 12–15 (p. 12), cited in Gago and Mezzadra, ‘A Critique of the Extractive Operations of Capital’, p. 576.

This definition points to the ways in which extractivism feeds on and extends pre-existing centre-periphery relations in the contemporary world order. For although colonial regimes relied heavily on extracting raw materials from the colonies, extractivism now forms a crucial element of many postcolonial economies, and is often carried out in the name of development. As Verónica Gago and Sandro Mezzadra argue about the Latin American case, 'the intensification of extractive activities primarily linked to non-renewable resources [...] have returned Latin American economies to their classical role as the providers of raw materials, except that now raw materials are mainly directed to China.'³ Equally, it is important to point out that the contemporary phase of capitalist accumulation consists of not only the increasing power of extractivism as an 'economic model' that fuels development in neo-liberal conditions but also that it coincides with, or even that it is currently being produced by, a global turn to authoritarian populism, from Latin America to India. This of course has far-reaching implications for the depletion of democracy as such and for the instrumentalization of democratic processes to smooth the flows of extraction.

My essay draws on extractivism as a political and economic project to argue that it is always already also a cultural project. Extractivism as a project that has its own specific process focalizes critical questions of cultural value, for what is being extracted on a global scale is not just the bauxite from the Niyamgiri mountains of Odisha or coal from the fields of Jharkhand in India, copper from Zambia, or gold and silver from Patagonia, but also memory, history, art, as well as 'cultural values that are tied to entire

3 Gago and Mezzadra, 'A Critique of the Extractive Operations of Capital', p. 576.

ecosystems of survival and existence.⁴ Heterodox economists such as Joan Martinez-Alier have contributed their scholarship towards developing theories of the domain of ‘non-economic epistemes’ that produce values that are incommensurable with those of the utilitarian economic realm.⁵ In a different vein I argue that extractivism draws in the conflicts and collisions between different kinds of value in ways that may help us work out the tenuousness of those divisions, beyond the classic base-superstructure framework that plots the relations between culture and economy.

The concept of incommensurability presupposes a problematic exteriority of culture, especially primitive or indigenous culture, to the operations of global capitalism. But Marxist theorists like Rosa Luxemburg, David Harvey, and others have pointed out that capitalism requires and depends on a non-capitalist outside to serve as resource to be extracted for its development.⁶ From this perspective, the outside (or the commons, as in the history of primitive accumulation), far from constituting some kind of natural external domain, is produced by capital itself.

In the context of such a conceptualization of extractivism as pertaining to both economic and non-economic

4 Ibid., p. 580.

5 See, for instance, Joan Martinez-Alier, *The Environmentalism of the Poor: A Study of Ecological Conflicts and Valuation* (Cheltenham: Edward Elgar, 2003). See also Martin P. A. Craig, Hayley Stevenson, and James Meadowcroft, ‘Debating Nature’s Value: Epistemic Strategy and Struggle in the Story of “Ecosystem Services”’, *Journal of Environmental Policy & Planning*, 21.6 (2019), pp. 811–25.

6 Rosa Luxemburg, *The Accumulation of Capital* (1913), trans. by Agnes Schwarzschild (London: Routledge and Kegan Paul, 1951); David Harvey, ‘The New Imperialism: Accumulation as Dispossession’, *The Socialist Register*, 40 (2009), pp. 63–87. See also Rashmi Varma, ‘Primitive Accumulation: The Political Economy of Indigenous Art in Post-colonial India’, *Third Text*, 27.6 (2013), pp. 748–61.

realms and constituting the intertwining of the two within the always emergent logic of capital, literary theory must then also attend to the problem of representation that attaches to the projects and processes of extraction. Within dominant postcolonial theory, one way of approaching this issue of representation has been via a theorization of an unassimilable subaltern otherness that is relentlessly exploited but cannot ever be adequately represented within elite frames of representation such as literature. This has in fact led to a wholesale scepticism towards, if not outright rejection of, representation itself in some quarters.⁷ This is in sharp distinction to the materialist modes of conceptualizing the constitutive outside as also the materially submerged or the ideologically invisibilized within canonical literary frames. After all, the coal underneath our fields or the bauxite in the belly of our mountains offer not only material value that is subjected to relentless extraction within the neoliberal world order, but also signify the domain of cultural difference in a world that thirsts for the invisible and the other to be corralled for extracting value. Macarena Gómez-Barris in her work on extractivism has called out the 'Eurocentric, high modernist, and totalizing visions of differentiated planetary life that rendered natives invisible and illegible'.⁸ Literature that is written either as a registration of the depleting life-worlds of the extractive zones or as resistance to the ongoing onslaught mounted

7 See Neil Lazarus, *The Postcolonial Unconscious* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2011), especially pp. 114–60. See also Rashmi Varma, 'Beyond the Politics of Representation', in *New Subaltern Politics: Reconceptualising Hegemony and Resistance in Contemporary India*, ed. by Srila Roy and Alf Nilsen (Delhi: Oxford University Press, 2015) for a more detailed explication of the point that I am making here.

8 Macarena Gómez-Barris, *The Extractive Zone: Social Ecologies and Decolonial Perspectives* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2017), p. 16.

on the poor and the indigenous communities can be read then as mediating global regimes of extraction that rely on conditions of invisibility. In this same vein, Achille Mbembe has pointed to extractivism as a historically racialized mode of accumulation. He writes:

Extraction was first and foremost the tearing or separation of human beings from their origins and birthplaces. The next step involved removal or extirpation, the condition that makes possible the act of pressing and without which extraction remains incomplete. Human beings became objects as slaves passed through the mill and were squeezed to extract maximum profit. Extraction not only branded them with an indelible stamp but also produced the Black Man, or [...] the subject of race, the very figure of what could be held at a certain distance from oneself, of a *thing* that could be discarded once it was no longer useful.⁹

What anti-extractivist literary theory asks us to do is to go beyond the call for the search for a radical otherness that resides outside the bounds of capitalism. It calls instead for the embrace of what Gómez-Barris calls a ‘cognitive and embodied mode of seeing’ that can help us apprehend ‘submerged modes’ of existence in the lifeworlds of the peripheries.¹⁰ Like the lining of coal dust on the lungs of miners.

In the following sections I analyse two short stories of Indian indigeneity where extractivism provides ‘the formal literary condition’ of indigenous writings. Through these readings I hope to illustrate the ways in which the liter-

9 Achille Mbembe, *Critique of Black Reason*, trans. by Laurent Dubois (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2017), p. 40

10 Gómez-Barris, *The Extractive Zone*, pp. xiii and xvi.

ary work of resisting extractivism can find formal shape.¹¹ Extractivism in the South Asian region has been central both to the unfolding of the European colonial project and to the subsequent postcolonial state formation. As Sharae Deckard puts it: 'The subcontinent has functioned as a testing-ground for large-scale environmental engineering, from the tea plantations, cash crop monocultures, and mass hydraulic schemes and river diversions of the colonial period, to the modernization schemes and Green Revolution in the twentieth-century, to transnational extractivism and bio-piracy in the neoliberal era.'¹² For India, in particular, extractive industries have been viewed as providing 'shortcuts to progress', with masses of people rendered landless and pushed into precarious labour in cities. Deckard rightly points out that this has continued well into the twenty-first century, triggering 'a wide spectrum of resource conflicts over pasture, fish, forest, the siting of hydro-electric mega-dams, and open-cast mining'.¹³ As the project of extractivism reshapes and ravages the countryside's material and social composition, the indigenous community is subjected to both spectacular moments of displacement (as when dams are constructed and millions are rendered homeless) as also to what Rob Nixon has termed 'slow violence'.¹⁴ This involves disrupting what

11 Christine Okoth, 'Extraction and Race, Then and Now: Ecology and the Literary Form of the Contemporary Black Atlantic', forthcoming in special issue of *Textual Practice*.

12 Sharae Deckard, 'Land, Water, Waste: Environment and Ecology in South Asian Fiction', in *The Oxford History of the Novel in English*, 11 vols (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2010–19), x: *The Novel in South and South East Asia since 1945*, ed. by Alex Tickell (2019), pp. 172–86 (p. 172).

13 *Ibid.*, 176.

14 Rob Nixon, *Slow Violence and the Environmentalism of the Poor* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2013).

Sudhir Puttnaik has called the 'ecological collectives'¹⁵ of indigenous communities. Virginius Xaxa has pointed out that the common predicament of these communities is 'characterised by steady erosion of their control and access to land, forest and other resources.'¹⁶

Two short stories from the collection titled *The Adivasi Will Not Dance* by Hansda Sowvendra Shekhar provide illustrative sites where the full force of extractivism is registered and worked through the frame of the literary.¹⁷ Shekhar, who is a medical officer in the small town of Pakur in Jharkhand in eastern India, has been hailed as a pioneering adivasi (from the Santhal tribe) writer writing in English, even as that nomination does grave injustice to his stature as an emergent writer of considerable heft writing in English.¹⁸ Given the troubled history of how adivasis have been represented in mainstream literary and cultural narratives, one would think that he would be carrying a heavy burden of this representational history. After all, he is writing not only against the dominant representational frameworks of the colonial archive but also against post-colonial perspectives in which adivasis are seen as savage, backward, primitive, dangerous, and criminal. Or, inno-

15 Sudhir Puttnaik, 'Tribal Rights and Big Capital', in *Adivasi Rights and Exclusion in India*, ed. by V. Srinivasa Rao (Delhi: Routledge India, 2019), pp. 142–152 (p. 148).

16 Virginius Xaxa, 'Isolation, Inclusion and Exclusion: The Case of Adivasis in India', *Adivasi Rights and Exclusion in India*, ed. by V. Srinivasa Rao (Delhi: Routledge India, 2019), pp. 27–40 (p. 29).

17 Hansda Sowvendra Shekhar, *The Adivasi Will Not Dance* (New Delhi: Speaking Tiger, 2015). Subsequent citations in-text.

18 Santhals are the largest group of adivasis in Jharkhand. Adivasi is the Hindi word referring to India's indigenous people (about 8 percent of the population, and among the most marginalized and exploited). In neoliberal India, their lands are under constant threat by capitalists, both national and global, as the forests and mountains where many adivasis still live are sources of rich raw materials.

cent, naïve, simple, pristine, liberated. In either case, they are the quintessential Other of modern India.

But Shekhar bears this burden critically and unsentimentally, and with a sharp eye on possibilities of imagining it otherwise, as freedom, in fiction. In his writing, adivasiness is re-signified from its essential outsider status as an undefinable difference, as an object that is barely glimpsed in the rear-view mirror of the vehicle of development. Rather, it is patiently registered through words, names, turns of phrase, and cultural allusions that are woven into the narratives whose unevenness registers the stark disparities and concurrent inequalities within the time-space of being adivasi. In these stories, humour, parody, and satire carry as much weight as gritty realism committed to representing the lives of India's most marginalized citizens. In other words, these stories are not 'about adivasis' as much as they are stories in which adivasis are the protagonists and the story-tellers.

Shekhar narrates the everyday lives of adivasis who work as bank clerks, performance artists, migrant workers, sex workers, and landless peasants. The stories narrate the loves, fears, desires, intimacy, aspirations, as well as greed and prejudices of these ordinary adivasis. They are marked by a profound unsentimentality that in itself constitutes the political stakes of fictionalizing adivasi lives today. These are tales of dispossession in the context of the collapse of adivasi agrarian society and adivasi culture. Adivasis have been turned into unskilled labourers, seeking migratory jobs, eking out a precarious existence or have been forced to perform their adivasi-ness for mainstream society whether as dancers or craftspersons. In so many ways, they are the quintessential victims of the development logic that renders modernity as trauma. They

endure multiple forms of violence on land ('they turn our land upside down, inside out, with their heavy machines [...]. They sell the stones from our earth in faraway places', p. 172), culture ('we are becoming people from nowhere', p. 173), body ('we cough blood and remain forever bare bones', p. 172), environment. But what characterizes Shekhar's fiction that seems to take in the totality of adivasi life through the fragment of the short story is a dialectical method in which a worldly narratorial consciousness becomes critically aware of the depleted material but culturally rich worlds of adivasi lives.

Although many of the stories are set in rural India's tribal heartland of Jharkhand, the 'mineral-rich core of the Indian subcontinent' (p. 114), Shekhar's characters live in spaces that span from remote villages to urbanized mining towns and large, populous cities. What unites their disparate locations and situations is the fact that their experiences are enmeshed in a complex web of structural and everyday oppression that operates at several scales all at once, from the local networks of societal taboos and prohibitions to the depredations of national and multinational capital that have been given a free hand to extract raw materials in places where adivasis reside, regions rich in mineral wealth and forest cover. As Xaxa points out, tribal communities in India have been subjected to 'twin colonialism.' Having suffered at the hands of British attempts to control them, they are now subjected to the newly imposed atrocities of the postcolonial neoliberal order.¹⁹ As Hari Charan Behera states: 'The tribal territories were annexed, their resources were exploited, and the people were forcefully evicted from their territory in the name of development since colonial administration.' But now the 'LA (Land Ac-

19 Xaxa, 'Isolation, Inclusion and Exclusion', p. 29.

quisition) Act has been introduced for acquisition of land, in the name of a 'so-called public purpose'.²⁰

The appropriation of resources by corporations and the postcolonial state certainly recalls colonial relations in Shekhar's stories, particularly in the title story 'The Adivasi Will Not Dance' where the protagonist laments: 'They turn our land upside down, inside out, with their heavy machines [...]. They sell the stones from our earth in faraway places' (p. 172). The gap between the (post)colonial capitalist world and tribal India shapes the sense of 'they' — the agents and beneficiaries of global capital — wreaking havoc on 'our' — Santhal — lands. The writing is imbued with an enduring sense of alienation from the 'faraway places' and shadowy figures who profit and who are estranged from the lives of the characters in the stories.

'The Adivasi Will Not Dance' is narrated as a monologue by the 60-year old Mangal Murmu who speaks as 'a foolish Santhal'. That of course is just a ruse, as the story reveals a highly politicized consciousness of the different geo-political scales — the region, the nation (Dilli) as well as the world — and the layered historical memories of revolutions past impinging on the lives of the adivasis. Set in Matiajore, near the mining towns of Pakur, Sahebganj, Godda, Ranchi, and Dumka, Mangal and his community of share-croppers have been displaced by mining. As he says poetically, 'we are becoming people from nowhere' (p. 173) — losing our roots, faith and identities.

The story uses a first person voice that lends a diegetic mode to the narration which is nevertheless constantly broken up by the intrusive worldly consciousness that

20 Hari Charan Behera, 'Land, Property Rights and Management Issues in Tribal Areas of Jharkhand: An Overview', in *Shifting Perspectives in Tribal Studies*, ed. by Maguni Charan Behera (Singapore: Springer, 2019), pp. 251–71 (pp. 254–55).

bears on the story and exceeds what the displaced farmer actually 'knows' and can comprehend within the limits of his experience. The story of Mangal Murmu is closely interwoven with that of the materials of extraction.²¹ The narrative is infused by an anti-extractivist aesthetic at the level of both form and content, as characterized by the dry dust of coal that envelops the entire world and forms a film through which the narrative eye perceives it. The coal's blackness 'is deep, indelible' (p. 174) and seeps into both material space and consciousness:

The trees and shrubs in our village bear black leaves. Our ochre earth has become black. The stones, the rocks, the sand, all black. The tiles on the roofs of our huts have lost their fire-burnt red. The vines and flowers and peacocks we Santhals draw on the outer walls of our houses are black. Our children — dark-skinned as they are — are forever covered with fine black dust [...]. (pp. 174–75).

The black coal dust that envelops everything, from the earth to the trees and stones to art and the body is draining out the blood (embodied in the ochre earth, the red tiles, and flowers) from adivasi life. But extractivism does not operate on an economy of exchange. Accumulation and dispossession are its currency. As Mangal Murmu asks rhetorically, for there is no one responsible for responding: 'What do we Santhals get in return? Tatters to wear. Barely

21 Citing Upamanyu Pablo Mukherjee, Sharae Deckard writes: 'Environment, as a web of relations between both human and non-human agents, is not only a prominent thematic presence in the content of South Asian fiction, but "a formal and stylistic presence" mediating uneven development, ecological imperialism, and environmental degradation', Deckard, 'Land, Water, Waste: Environment and Extractivism in South Asian Fiction', p. 172.

enough food. Such diseases that we can't breathe properly, we cough blood and forever remain bare bones' (p. 172).

However, these same adivasis whose very blood is blackened by the dust of extraction are recruited to showcase the nation's diversity through cultural performance — dance, music, craft. Mangal asks poignantly: 'What has our art given us? Displacement, tuberculosis' (p. 178). The purportedly sacred and ritualistic nature of adivasi art is opportunistically commodified, as adivasis are made to dance on land from which they have been evicted for a thermal plant whose benefits are most likely to be siphoned off elsewhere.

In the end, Mangal Murmu's impassioned monologue and his courageous refusal to perform his indigeneity, collapses in defeat as the government's henchmen descend on him for his impertinence in speaking to the President of India. The spectacle of a landless adivasi addressing the highest office holder in the nation is one that can only be conjured through and in fiction. It also doubles up on the meaning of representation that Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak had written about in her famous essay 'Can the Subaltern Speak?'.²² In staging a powerful confrontation between the adivasi and the state, the narrative suggests that power also lies in refusal. The eloquent address of the protagonist simultaneously expresses the anguish of the dehumanized, proletarianized, and commoditized people, while giving literal voice to the communities that are submerged beneath the radar of global social justice movements.

22 Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak, 'Can the Subaltern Speak?', in *Can the Subaltern Speak? Reflections on the History of an Idea*, ed. by Rosalind C. Morris (New York: Columbia University Press, 2010), pp. 21–78.

The story 'Baso-jhi' operates on a different register and narrates the story of a character who is the classic figure of a scapegoat for the traumas of modernity that her community undergoes. It is told almost entirely from the perspective of a narrator who has the worldly knowledge of the long history of adivasi exploitation. In Baso-jhi's story the private, communal, and public worlds of exploitation collide in such a way that the story is best read and understood as an allegory. It is the allegorical form that reveals the gaps that are left unrevealed in the narration of the private trauma of an adivasi woman.

The story is set in the village of Sarjomdih in Jharkhand, on the large forested plateau known as Chhotanagpur. It is the quintessentially in-between kind of place, the kind of borderland that extractivism produces and thrives on. A predominantly Santhal village that worships Sarna, deity of the 'aboriginal faith' of the area, it has grown into a semi-urban conurbation with the establishment of a mine and a copper factory on its southern outskirts. This 'Copper Town', which was forever 'illuminated and throbbing with life', was 'now gradually threatening to swallow all of Sarjomdih' (pp. 114–15). As it turns out, it becomes the epicentre for a chain of events that are to destroy the community in the village. Since its establishment 'few people farmed in Sarjomdih anymore' (p. 115). Having been forced to give up their 'fecund land' for the building of roads and factories, the villagers had turned into 'coolie' and 'reja', wage labourers in the factory and mines. Those who succeeded in garnering some measure of upward mobility gratefully accepted low level jobs in banks, the army, and government offices, exercising power in a community now riddled with class hierarchies. The narrative's unevenness

is brought to the fore when in parts it reads like a litany of opposition to development as an elite ideology, in part as sociological discourse: the village, we are told, is 'standing testimony to the collapse of an agrarian Adivasi society and the dilution of Adivasi culture, the twin gifts of industrialisation and progress' (p. 115). For 'Sarjomdih, which bore the repercussions of development' had now acquired 'all the signs of urbanity' — concrete houses, cable tv, two-wheelers, hand pump, a primary school, and a narrow winding tarmac road called the 'main road' (p. 115). In spite of these ragged signs and 'gifts' of an unevenly distributed modernity, the narrator concedes: 'Still, this was progress, considering how the Adivasis had lived so far' (p. 115).

But as much as the outer frame of the story is narrated by an urbane adivasi who is critical of the depredations of development, the story belongs to its eponymous protagonist. It privileges her consciousness, her feelings, the ways in which she perceives things and the social relationships that she forges and that are in the process of tumultuous change. It is in the gap between the two frames that we can read how this story operates as an allegory of extractivism itself, narrating the multiple levels at which extractivism functions to create alienation both of adivasi society from the dominant, mainstream society and within adivasi society itself whose ravaged condition is held in place by the production of internal boundaries between inside and outside, with catastrophic consequences for both the individual and her community.

The story paints an idyllic scene at the outset at the centre of which is the figure of Basanti, or Baso-jhi. Dressed in a white cotton saree, she cuts an impressive figure as the narrative eye zooms in on her tall, strong, dusky figure

standing among a group of women who seem to have some sort of social bond. The description of her physical features is accompanied by the declaration that she had become 'an integral part of the day to day life of the village' (p. 114). She seems to possess a reservoir of stories of Bidu, the Santhal hero who slayed demons 'a long, long time ago', that she narrates to the children around her (p. 113). But it is precisely in the way in which the narrative draws attention to the process of becoming 'integral' that we first note the presence of an outsiderliness that haunts the ideal of community in this village.

As the narrative sweeps away from Baso-jhi to take in the broader rural topography, it brings into view all the contradictions of industrialization and progress as they strike roots in a place like Sarjomdih. The very basic infrastructure of water delivered through hand pumps, a main road built to connect the village to Copper Town and a primary school combines unevenly with the Cartoon Network playing on cable television and the increasing availability of chowmein as a desired culinary option, producing a deeply uneven experience of modernity in the village.²³

But what is obviously simmering just below the surface of these tantalizing slivers of progress are the ravages of dispossession through mining that are evident not only at the level of the political and economic dispossession of adivasi land and rights, but in the sphere of social reproduction. For it is through a process grounded in the labour of unremunerated care work that Baso-jhi had become 'an integral part' of life in the village. And it is through a tearing of that fabric of care and community that she becomes

23 See Warwick Research Collective (WReC), *Combined and Uneven Development: Towards a New Theory of World-Literature* (Liverpool: Liverpool University Press, 2015) for a proper explication of this point.

doubly dispossessed. As the narrative backtracks to fill us in on her life story we learn that Baso-jhi had been brought into the household by Soren-babu, a bank clerk who lives in the village with his wife and children on a salary that does not afford him paid household help. He had found her destitute at a railway station, and his memory of having met her at a family wedding years prior ignited his sympathy for her. So it is that through a process grounded in the work of social reproduction that Baso-jhi becomes 'an integral part' of life in both the household and in the village. She sets about making herself useful — cleaning, washing, looking after the children: 'In Baso-jhi, Pushpa [Soren-babu's wife] found a baby-sitter, a house-keeper, a laundrywoman, a vegetable-chopper, a masala-grinder, a fish-scaler, a back-scrubber, a scalp-masseuse, a confidante and a companion' (p. 117). The complex work of social care allows for the creation of a different kind of family that traditionally made space for 'surplus women' like Baso-jhi who takes care of the household in return for shelter and participation in family life, albeit from its margins.

This precariously carved out social world is shaken to the core when Baso-jhi is accused of possessing witch-like powers that are causing deaths in the village. It is then that we get the first glimpse of her inner consciousness: 'When Basanti had first heard of the accusation, she had been shocked. A long-buried, agonizing recollection had assaulted her, like a thin rubber band which snaps as one is tying a chignon, and stings the fingers' (p. 119). The narrative voice claims access to Baso-jhi's inner consciousness and her 'agonizing recollection'. It now shifts gears and moves alongside her memories that connect this moment of expulsion from the social network of Sarjomdih to what had occurred just before she had arrived. Back then she had

been blamed for her grandson's death that was followed by a brutal eviction by her sons that left her a destitute widow. These two linked catastrophic events open up space in the narrative for the reader to glimpse her back story through memories mediated by the narrative voice. Married off at age 14 to a farmer twice her age from the village of Chapri in Bengal, Baso-jhi had stepped out for the first time into the world. Boarding the train that is a foreign object to her, she is transported to Salbani, his village. There she gives birth to two sons and leads what we understand to be a happy life, visiting the weekly market to buy things for herself and her family and enjoying consuming the small luxuries of life. When she tragically loses her husband and becomes a young widow, she is cheated of her farmland. Left with a small but fertile piece of land on which she grows vegetables to sell at the market, she finds work in construction sites and rice-mills, and gathers maha and tendu leaves to supplement her income. She becomes the quintessential 'gritty Santhal widow'. Alas her sons' greed and selfish disregard for her 'lifetime of struggle' (p. 126) renders it without value. When her grandson dies due to diarrhoea, Baso-jhi is held responsible. She is seen to be sacrificing children for evil gods and is brutally evicted from the family home. It is then that she arrives at the Copper Town railway station, spending nights on the platform until she catches Soren-babu's eye. What is evidenced in both moments of eviction is the pressure placed on the formation of the nuclear adivasi family that is coming into being. The non-productive widow who is now an economic and social burden becomes the scapegoat in the face of death, illnesses, and conditions of precarity shaping adivasi lives caught in the maelstrom of desiring a modernity that

is held up by a still backward infrastructure of health and education.

When her friend Maino's grandson dies in Sarjomdih, it is the third death in the village in the two years since Baso-jhi's arrival (the other two were old men). The child had been to Copper Town in the days before to celebrate a festival. With his death, the narrator points to an unexpected rupture in the fabric of village life: 'All of a sudden, Basanti's presence began to matter' (p. 121). Chorus-like voices of villagers now proclaim: 'She was a dahni — a witch. She'd killed her own grandson and, for that, her sons had disowned her. How could she expect strangers to accept her? She truly was a witch' (p. 122). This time she leaves Soren-babu's home before she is asked to vacate the small room she occupies outside the main homestead.

The narrative registers a simmering sense of unease as Baso-jhi's plight comes to represent the wider situation of women — widowed as well as educated young women — who are decried as sorceresses and witches. They are the scapegoats for an emergent modernization of adivasi life under extractive capitalism. The dominant modes of capitalist exploitation extract every last grain of value from reproduction, making outcast all those who threaten the structures of the emergent nuclear family and normative heterosexuality that harbours Brahmanical notions of female beauty (light complexion) and female subservience. These go against long-standing adivasi traditions where women historically held freedoms unimaginable in mainstream Hindu society. Thus Baso-jhi feels empathy for Bijoya, a young woman in the village who is a graduate in history and aspires to be a teacher. But she has 'the wrong sort of complexion', in addition to being burdened with a degree such that 'she didn't have too many chances' in

finding a suitor. Although Bijoya could cook, clean, sew, take care of the elderly, 'even clean cowsheds and split firewood when required' (p. 119), her economic value is purportedly overshadowed by her social burden in a society that hopes to mimic dominant social formations such as the nuclear Hindu family. In reality, however, she is needed to perform unremunerated care. For although rumours of her power of sorcery persist, smeared with accusations of how she had contributed to 'her mother's death, her brother's disability, her father's failed paddy crop' (p. 119), her marriage would leave the men in her family without her double labour of economic and social care.

Shekhar's stories attest to the ways in which modernity ushers in new social relations and economic arrangements that emerge alongside pre-existing modes of domination. A depleted adivasi society is the object of both economic and cultural extractivism, and older forms of community and resistance are eroded in the process. Baso-jhi as the village witch and Mangal Murmu, the mad, hysterical Santhal who refuses to dance are symptoms of a deeply traumatized society as a whole. In his 1986 essay on third-world literature as national allegory, Fredric Jameson had written of the combined and uneven spatio-temporal conjunctures of third-world literature in which 'archaic customs' are 'radically transformed and denatured by the superposition of capitalist relations', contributing to significant generic discontinuities that are the hallmark of such literature.²⁴ When Jameson writes that 'the primordial crime of capitalism is exposed: not so much wage labour as such, or the ravages of the money form, of the remorseless and

24 Fredric Jameson, 'Third-World Literature in the Era of Multinational Capitalism', *Social Text*, 15 (Autumn, 1986), pp. 65–88; reprinted in *Allegory and Ideology* (London: Verso, 2019), pp. 159–86 (p. 182).

impersonal rhythms of the market but rather this primal displacement of the older forms of collective life from a land now seized and privatized', the power of his theorization is borne out in Shekhar's fiction.²⁵

To recall Jameson's famous essay on third-world literature as national allegory in the era of world literature is also to recall Jameson's pronouncement that 'the allegorical spirit is profoundly discontinuous, a matter of breaks and heterogeneities, of the multiple polysemia of the dream rather than the homogeneous representation of the symbol.'²⁶ This then points to the necessity of a more materialist conceptualization of the crisis of representation that my essay alluded to before. But what does a crisis of representation mean in an era in which world literature has come to stand in for the world-system as a whole? This is where the *work* of world literature comes into play, especially when the task is to represent extractivism as the ongoing colonial dimension of our times.

Jameson himself recalls the fury that his earlier essay had generated even among Marxists who saw him moving away from the classical Marxist position in his pointing out 'that the international class situation of the period could be mapped as an insurrection of the international peasantry of Third World countries surrounding the international city bourgeoisie of the rich countries.'²⁷ Always preoccupied with the project of cognitive mapping in times of late capitalism, he goes on to point out that class struggles within nation-states are now displaced on to a global scale, creating a new 'representational dilemma.'²⁸ He writes: 'Its two

25 Ibid.

26 Ibid., p. 184.

27 Fredric Jameson, 'Political: National Allegory B. Commentary', in *Allegory and Ideology*, pp. 187–216 (p. 188).

28 Ibid., p. 189.

dimensions — class struggle with a given national situation and the globalized forces at work outside it on a world scale — are at least for the moment incommensurable: which is to say that it is their very disparity and the difficulty of finding mediations between them that is the fundamental political problem for the Left today.²⁹ Allegory in this situation can serve as ‘a diagnostic instrument to reveal this disjunction.’³⁰ That precisely is the work of world literature in our times when extractivism provides the dominant framework for accessing the world’s resources that are material and cultural at the same time.

29 Ibid., p. 190.

30 Ibid.

Rashmi Varma, 'Extracting Indigeneity: Revaluing the Work of World Literature in These Times', in *The Work of World Literature*, ed. by Francesco Giusti and Benjamin Lewis Robinson, Cultural Inquiry, 19 (Berlin: ICI Berlin Press, 2021), pp. 127–47 <https://doi.org/10.37050/ci-19_06>

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