



Hul: Cry Rebel – Subaltern Resistance, Colonial Violence, And Adivasi Identity In Historical Fiction

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Abstract

Sanjay Bahadur's *Hul: Cry Rebel* (2013) revisits the Santhal rebellion of 1855, a pivotal yet historically marginalized uprising against British colonial rule and feudal exploitation in eastern India. This paper examines the novel as a work of historical fiction that reconstructs subaltern resistance while interrogating colonial epistemologies and capitalist modernity. Drawing on Subaltern Studies (Ranjit Guha), postcolonial theory (Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak), Foucauldian notions of power and discipline, and eco-critical perspectives, the paper argues that Bahadur's narrative reclaims indigenous voices erased by colonial historiography. Through a close reading of character arcs, narrative structure, and thematic motifs, the paper demonstrates how the novel foregrounds Adivasi ecological ethics, critiques structures of domination, and reimagines history as a site of resistance. Ultimately, *Hul: Cry Rebel* emerges as a powerful intervention that bridges past and present struggles over land, identity, and justice.

Keywords: Santhal Rebellion of 1855, Historical fiction, Colonial violence, Subaltern resistance, Postcolonial literature, Adivasi identity

Introduction

The historiography of colonial India has long privileged elite narratives, often relegating tribal uprisings to the margins as spontaneous, irrational disturbances rather than organized resistance movements. Among these, the Santhal rebellion of 1855, also known as the Hul, remains a significant yet underrepresented episode. Sanjay Bahadur's *Hul: Cry Rebel* seeks to redress this omission by transforming historical fragments into a compelling narrative of resistance, memory, and identity. The novel situates itself at the intersection of history and fiction, blending archival material with imaginative reconstruction. As Bahadur writes, the rebellion was not merely an outbreak of violence but "a cry for justice, born of land lost, dignity denied, and a world overturned" (Bahadur 112). This articulation foregrounds the ethical and political stakes of the Hul, reframing it as a conscious struggle rather than a chaotic uprising. This paper argues that *Hul: Cry Rebel* functions as a counter-historical narrative that challenges colonial representations of tribal communities. By centering subaltern voices and emphasizing indigenous epistemologies, the novel destabilizes dominant narratives and offers an

alternative framework for understanding resistance. Through an interdisciplinary approach combining literary analysis, historical contextualization, and theoretical engagement, this study explores how Bahadur reimagines the Hul as both a historical event and a continuing symbol of resistance.

The Santhal rebellion erupted in 1855 in the forested regions of present-day Jharkhand and West Bengal, mobilizing tens of thousands of tribal people under leaders such as Sidhu and Kanhu Murmu. The uprising was a response to multiple forms of exploitation, including oppressive revenue systems, predatory moneylending practices, and the encroachment of colonial authority into indigenous territories. Colonial policies such as the Permanent Settlement fundamentally altered land relations, transforming communal ownership into private property and enabling the rise of zamindars and intermediaries. For the Santhals, whose worldview was rooted in a collective relationship with land, this shift represented not only economic dispossession but also cultural and spiritual dislocation. Bahadur captures this transformation vividly, noting that “the forest, once their mother, was now measured, taxed, and sold, its spirit reduced to numbers in a ledger” (Bahadur 89). This line encapsulates the violence of colonial modernity, which operates not only through physical coercion but also through epistemic restructuring. Ranajit Guha’s concept of the “prose of counter-insurgency” is particularly relevant here. Guha argues that colonial narratives systematically delegitimized peasant uprisings by portraying them as lawless and irrational (Guha 14). *Hul: Cry Rebel* challenges this discourse by presenting the rebellion as a rational and organized response to systemic oppression.

Discussion

The novel’s emphasis on marginalized voices aligns with the concerns of Subaltern Studies, particularly the work of Ranajit Guha and Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak. Guha’s project seeks to recover the agency of subaltern groups excluded from elite historiography, while Spivak famously interrogates whether the subaltern can truly “speak” within dominant discursive frameworks (Spivak 271). In *Hul: Cry Rebel*, Bahadur attempts to answer this question by narrativizing the experiences of the Santhals from within their own cultural context. The text resists ventriloquizing the subaltern; instead, it constructs a narrative space where indigenous voices emerge through dialogue, memory, and collective action.

Michel Foucault’s analysis of power as diffuse and pervasive provides another lens for understanding the novel. Colonial rule in *Hul: Cry Rebel* is not limited to military domination but extends into legal, economic, and cultural domains. The imposition of taxes, the regulation of land, and the surveillance of tribal communities exemplify what Foucault describes as disciplinary power (Foucault 135). Bahadur’s narrative highlights how these mechanisms produce subjects who are both controlled and resistant.

The novel also engages with eco-critical concerns by foregrounding the Santhals’ relationship with nature. Unlike colonial capitalism, which treats land as a commodity, the Santhals view it as a living entity imbued with spiritual significance. This ecological perspective challenges dominant paradigms of development and resonates with contemporary environmental debates. As one character observes, “the land does not belong to us; we belong to the land” (Bahadur 156). This inversion of ownership underscores the ethical dimensions of indigenous epistemologies.

One of the defining features of *Hul: Cry Rebel* is its multi-stranded narrative structure, which interweaves the stories of Bikram, Shibani, and Lt. James Davies. This multiplicity of perspectives allows the novel to explore the Hul from different vantage points, complicating simplistic binaries of colonizer and colonized.

Bikram’s trajectory forms the emotional core of the novel. Orphaned and marginalized, he initially embodies the vulnerability of the subaltern subject. However, his gradual transformation into a participant in the rebellion reflects a process of political awakening. Bahadur writes, “Bikram felt the fire within him grow, no longer the fear of a hunted animal, but the resolve of one who has nothing left

to lose” (Bahadur 203). This shift from fear to resistance mirrors the collective consciousness of the Santhal community.

Shibani’s narrative introduces a gendered perspective, highlighting the constraints faced by women within both colonial and indigenous contexts. As a child widow, she is subjected to patriarchal norms that restrict her autonomy. Her story reveals that oppression is not monolithic but operates across intersecting axes of gender, class, and caste. Bahadur notes that “her silence was not chosen; it was imposed, layer by layer, like the white cloth she was forced to wear” (Bahadur 174). This imagery underscores the internalization of patriarchal discipline.

The character of Lt. James Davies provides insight into the complexities of colonial subjectivity. While he is an agent of imperial power, he is also depicted as morally conflicted. Through Davies, Bahadur explores the contradictions within colonial ideology. At one point, Davies reflects, “we call them savages, yet it is we who bring fire and blood to their homes” (Bahadur 221). This acknowledgment destabilizes the moral authority of colonial discourse.

The novel portrays colonialism as a system of extraction that operates through both overt and covert forms of violence. The alliance between British administrators, zamindars, and moneylenders creates a network of exploitation that ensnares the Santhals. Economic exploitation is depicted through the cycle of debt and dispossession. As Bahadur writes, “the more they paid, the more they owed; the more they worked, the less they had” (Bahadur 132). This paradox reflects the structural nature of colonial capitalism, where exploitation is embedded in the system itself. Physical violence, meanwhile, is represented through brutal reprisals against the rebels. The suppression of the Hul is marked by massacres and collective punishment, illustrating the coercive power of the colonial state.

The ecological dimension of *Hul: Cry Rebel* is central to its critique of colonial modernity. The Santhals’ relationship with the forest is depicted as reciprocal and sustainable, in contrast to the exploitative practices of the colonial regime. The forest is not merely a backdrop but an active participant in the narrative. It provides refuge, sustenance, and spiritual grounding for the Santhals. Bahadur describes it as “a living presence, breathing with them, sheltering them, mourning with them” (Bahadur 167). The destruction of the forest thus represents not only environmental degradation but also cultural loss. The rebellion can be read as an attempt to defend both land and identity.

A key contribution of the novel is its emphasis on collective agency. Unlike colonial narratives that depict tribal uprisings as leaderless mobs, *Hul: Cry Rebel* highlights the and behind the rebellion. The figure of Sidhu Murmu emerges as a charismatic leader who mobilizes the community through a shared vision of justice. However, Bahadur avoids reducing the rebellion to individual heroism, instead emphasizing the collective nature of resistance. As the narrative states, “it was not one voice but many, rising together, that became the Hul” (Bahadur 245). This collective voice challenges the individualistic framework of Western historiography.

The novel raises important questions about the nature of history and memory. By blending fact and fiction, Bahadur creates a narrative that is both historically grounded and imaginatively expansive. This approach aligns with Hayden White’s argument that historical narratives are inherently constructed and shaped by narrative choices (White 7). *Hul: Cry Rebel* acknowledges this constructedness while using it to recover marginalized perspectives. The act of storytelling itself becomes a form of resistance, preserving memories that might otherwise be erased. As one character reflects, “if we do not tell our stories, others will tell them for us and they will not be kind” (Bahadur 198).

Although set in the nineteenth century, *Hul: Cry Rebel* resonates strongly with contemporary issues. The displacement of tribal communities due to mining, deforestation, and development projects echoes the historical processes depicted in the novel. The text implicitly connects the Hul to ongoing struggles for land rights and environmental justice. In this sense, the novel functions not only as a historical narrative but also as a commentary on present-day inequalities.

Conclusion

Hul: Cry Rebel is a significant contribution to both historical fiction and postcolonial literature. By reimagining the Santhal rebellion through a subaltern perspective, the novel challenges dominant narratives and foregrounds indigenous voices. Through its engagement with themes of resistance, ecological ethics, and narrative recovery, the text offers a powerful critique of colonial and capitalist structures. It demonstrates that the struggle for land, dignity, and identity is not confined to the past but continues into the present. Ultimately, Bahadur's novel serves as both a memorial to a forgotten rebellion and a call to recognize the enduring relevance of subaltern resistance.

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