
A Feminist Study of Geetanjali Shree's *Tomb of Sand*

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ABSTRACT

A renowned Indian writer and the International Booker Prize winner (2022) Geetanjali Shree (1957-) is a prominent novelist in Commonwealth literature who explores various themes in her novels. The portrayal of the conditions of women in a patriarchal society has been the subject of many Commonwealth writers and Shree is no exception. Her novels throw a light on issues such as gender discrimination, exploitation and suppression of women in a male-dominated society. The present paper is an attempt to analyse her recently published novel *Tomb of Sand* from a feminist perspective. The novel is a family saga that depicts how its female protagonist becomes selfish at the age of eighty and crosses the border to find a meaning of life. It also throws a light on the psychological impact of pains and sufferings on women. The paper explores how the female characters in the novel challenge gender stereotypes and try to break tradition in their own ways.

Geetanjali Shree (1957-), an excellent story-teller, is an Indian novelist and a short-story writer who primarily writes in Hindi. Her works have been translated into different languages such as English, French, German, Serbian and Korean. She has authored five novels, namely *Mai* (1993), *Humara Shahar Us Baras* (1998), *Tirohit* (2001), *Khali Jagah* (2010), and *Ret Samadhi* (2018). Four of her novels have been translated into English as *Mai* (2001), *That Empty Space* (2011), *The Roof Beneath Their Feet* (2013) and *Tomb of Sand* (2021). Besides novels, she has also written several short-story collections. The publication of *Tomb of Sand* brought her international recognition as the novel became the first novel in any Indian language to win the prestigious International Booker Prize in the year 2022. Majority of her novels are set in traditional Indian families and explore issues such as discriminations on the basis of caste and gender, exploitation and suppression of women, changing family values, identity crisis, quest for freedom etc.

It has often been seen in a patriarchal set-up that women are considered to be weak and fragile. Right from their childhood, they are seen dependent upon somebody and are never allowed to express themselves. In the name of tradition, certain set of rules are ascribed to them. To challenge such rules, inequalities and stereotypes, evolved the concept of "feminism".

Feminism is a political and literary movement that talks about the equality of both the sexes in all aspects whether it be social, political or economic. In literature, feminism generally deals with the portrayal of women characters and the treatments which they receive from their male counterparts as well as the society. Women are generally presented as stereotypes, taking care of the household and family. Feminist writers question such stereotypes and believe that all such gender roles are not biological or natural, rather social. It is the society that has determined

a set of rules which it considers appropriate for men and women. As Simone de Beauvoir points out,

“One is not born, but rather becomes a woman. No biological, psychic, or economic fate defines the figure that the human female presents in society; it is civilization as a whole that produces this creature, intermediate between male and eunuch, which is described as feminine.” (Beauvoir 273). Thus, she clearly posits that society as a whole is responsible for differentiating between male and female.

Mary Wollstonecraft (1759-1797) was the first English writer who talked about the rights of women. In her seminal work, *A Vindication of the Rights of Women* (1792), she describes the importance of education and says that education is the only tool through which she could become a companion to man. Similarly, Margaret Fuller (1810-1850), an American critic, also talks about education, employment and political rights of women.

Towards a Feminist Poetics (1977) by Elaine Showalter (1941-) is considered to be one of the most influential essays in feminist literary criticism. In this work, she has examined the development of women writers in three phases- the feminine, the feminist and the female. In Feminist Phase (1840-1880), women writers tried to imitate male writers. Novelists such as George Eliot and Elizabeth Gaskell fall under this phase. In Feminine Phase (1880-1920), women writers rebelled against the male values prevalent in society. The Female Phase (1920-), includes writers such as Katherine Mansfield, Rebecca West etc who show new style, content and language in their writings. Thus, through these three phases, Showalter shows the development of women writers from imitation to self-discovery.

As a feminist writer, Geetanjali Shree tries to bring forth the hidden voices of women through her novels. She projects strong female protagonists in her novels. Her novels have both conservative and modern female characters. Some of her female protagonists pass through a strange psychological struggle and remain victims of the Indian patriarchal society. For example, in her first novel *Mai*, she portrays the protagonist Mai (Mother) as the typical example of woman stereotypes. She confines herself within the four walls of the house but never allows her daughter Sunaina to live the same conventional life. She never discriminates between her son and daughter and gives them freedom to live an independent, free life. The novel is an attempt to explore the hidden psychic conditions and struggles of women in a male dominated society.

Originally published in Hindi as *Ret Samadhi* in 2018, translated into English by Daisy Rockwell in 2021, *Tomb of Sand* tells the story of Ma, an eighty-year-old woman who has turned her back to the rest of the family after the death of her husband. Her family members including her son, daughter, daughter-in-law and grandchildren give their best efforts to bring her back to life, but all in vain. Then one day, she suddenly disappears and is found at the police station. Thereafter, she leaves her son Bade's house and starts to stay with her daughter, Beti. It is the Beti's house where Ma completely transforms herself and regains her health. She develops a close friendship with a transgender Rosie. When Rosie dies, Ma was again depressed, but then she decides to travel to Pakistan with Beti to fulfil Rosie's last wish- to deliver *chironji* to a relative. When they reach Pakistan, it is revealed that it is Ma's home-country. She was born before Partition and she also married to a Muslim named Anwar, but she came to India after Partition. She has come back to Pakistan in search of her lost husband. Ultimately, she dies there, and that too in a special way: when she was shot by the bullet, she falls on the ground not by facing the earth, but facing the sky.

The novel can be analysed through a feminist perspective. It is evident in the very beginning of the novel that it is a feminist novel as Shree writes:

“This particular tale has a border and women who come and go as they please. Once you've got women and a border, a story can write itself. Even women on their own are enough.” (Shree 11)

The whole narrative of the novel is centred around Ma. When the novel opens, she can be seen upset and depressed on the death of her husband and she refuses to come out of her bed. Prior to her husband's death, she was not so. She used to take care of her family and “everyone's breathed flawed through her, and she breathed everyone's breath” (Shree 19). However, the death of her husband completely changed her. The entire family worries about her and tries different ways to revive her. She listens to nobody and lies in the bed, turning her back. But one day, she goes missing and everyone wonders how could she rise out of her bed. After a long search, she was found by the police. Her sudden disappearance is the first incident in the novel which shows that she has decided to embark into a new journey. Later, she decides to move to her daughter's house.

A new sort of transformation can be seen in Ma when she starts to live with her daughter. Beti gives her the life which she has never led.

Ma's friendship with Rosie breaks all sorts of gender stereotypes. Their friendship is so close that Ma follows Rosie blindly. With the recommendations of Rosie, Ma abandons sari and starts wearing gown. Even when she was admitted to the hospital, she was concerned about the absence of Rosie. When the news of Rosie's death reaches to Ma, she was highly disappointed. Rosie had to deliver *chironji* to her relative in Pakistan. Ma takes this responsibility upon her shoulders and with her family's consent, she goes to Pakistan with Beti.

When Ma narrates her past to the butterflies, it is revealed that before partition, she married Anwar. She describes how she and other girls were kidnapped, loaded in a truck and tortured and how she survived. Later, she was informed that a border has been drawn between India and Pakistan and she is safely brought to India.

She was caught in Khyber without a visa and was therefore, imprisoned. During her interrogation, she does not answer to any question in a straightforward manner rather she makes fun of them. When Ali Anwar interrogates her, then instead of answering his questions, she gives him a long lecture about the futility of the border and tells him how the partition has disappointed her

When she was imprisoned, her will-power remains unchanged. An ordinary person would have died under such circumstances but she remains fearless. In prison, she asks her daughter and the guards to kick her so that she could 'practise falling properly'. When everyone asks her the reason, she says that when the bullet will come, she does not want to fall backwards but she will die facing the sky, and consequently that happens as well:

“A bullet came, punctured her body, shot through and out the other side. Anyone else would have sprawled face down in the mud, but Ma flipped backwards like she was doing a somersault.” (Shree 13)

Another important character in the novel is Beti. She has created her own world in her house where she lives the way she desires. There were strict social codes in the house, but Ma has never imposed any of them upon Beti. She “managed to forge a path towards the forbidden” (Shree 35). Thus, Beti always lived an independent and carefree life.

When she was unable to adhere to the traditional rules, she leaves the house. Initially, she finds difficulty in getting an employment, but later she becomes a liberal feminist and is interviewed everywhere. She settles on her own without seeking the help of anyone.

There are no strict rules and social codes at her home as they were at her brother's home. When

she brings her mother to her home, she promises herself to revive her mother's health and "bring her back to life". Shree writes:

"Today she was presenting Ma with a new life. She would make her live again." (Shree 239)

In Indian tradition, it is generally seen that the parents stay with their son, but the character of Beti in this novel, reverses this tradition. She not only cares her mother but gives her a new life. She allows her mother to live life at the fullest, which results in Ma's complete transformation. She takes the charge of her mother and there is the interchange of their roles as Ma starts to behave like a child and Beti takes care of her mother as if she is her daughter.

With the arrival of Ma, a change in Beti's life could also be noticed. She always worries about her mother, not only during daytime, but also at night. She even sacrifices her sleep to keep a watch on Ma. The continuous getting up of Ma at night, her snoring and the jingle of her bangles disturb Beti's sleep. She was not used to such things earlier. She liked to sleep alone without anyone's company. She even forgets her lover KK. Beti was fully aware of the fact that "a mother and a girlfriend cannot exist in the same body" (Shree 273). Thus, the one who has always lived a life in her own way changes her lifestyle for the sake of her mother.

When she was imprisoned with her mother in Pakistan, she is unable to bear the prison life. She considered prison guards as the 'murderers'. She misses her past but is unable to express her feelings to anyone, not even to her mother. Her thoughts, feelings and emotions are described through the stream of consciousness in the novel.

Shree describes Beti as "a free spirit of the new age, liberated from family values" (Shree 177), which shows that she likes to live life without any restrictions. She herself declares:

"I'm a different sort of woman, I live alone, I had ambitions to live differently, and I stayed apart from the rest". (Shree 660)

Another female character in the novel is Bahu. She takes care of everyone but is never respected. Not only Bade and Beti, but even the servants at times blame her (when Ma disappears), She has always felt lonely in her home. Her younger son- Overseas Son- is the only person who takes care of her. Whatever happens with her, she shares it with him on phone and he is the only person who worries about her health.

When the news that Ma has fallen at Beti's home reaches to Bahu, she boldly points out the faults of her husband. She confronts him angrily and says that he never visits at her sister's home to notice the bizarre life which his mother is living. He always sends his wife and his son, Sid. In fact, she considers Bade also to be responsible for Ma's fall.

Shree has portrayed Bade as a typical Indian patriarch, who wants to control everything. He simply keeps shouting even for no reason because he considers it as a part of tradition. Sometimes, he shouts upon servants, but most of the times he is seen yelling at his wife. Many incidents in the novel suggests that they simply squabble upon useless issues such as the left-over food, while packing things to shift in post-retirement flat etc but Bahu also faces him fearlessly.

Bade had tried to put restrictions on Beti's freedom like not allowing her to meet her friends, not allowing anyone in the family to talk to her etc. But Beti leaves Bade's home and starts to live alone as an independent girl. This move of Beti had upset her brother and the relationship between them turned sourer.

Though Beti was loved and respected everywhere, her brother never admired her changed lifestyle. He even forbids Ma to meet her and talk to her on phone.

Bade is unable to believe that his mother has started to stay at her sister's home. He always looks for the opportunity to take her back. He never visits his sister's home even when Ma stays there. His gender prejudice prohibits him from going there. Once he goes there, but watches his mother from outside, hiding in the bush, so that he can't be seen by anyone. He was shocked to see Ma's transformation as he saw her in a different attire. He always liked his mother in sari. He imagines in his memory all the saris which his mother has worn and thinks how beautiful she looks when she wears sari. He thinks "Ma was Ma only in a sari" (Shree 382). He even considers Ma's new, unusual, bizarre attire responsible for her fall.

No direct communication can be seen between Bade and Beti throughout the course of the novel. They often tried to avoid eye contact and speak in an indirect way. Throughout the course of the novel, there are just two incidents where one can find Bade addressing Beti- the first incident occurs when he hands a bundle of saris to her in the hospital and the second when in a commanding tone, he asks her to pack Ma's things so that they can take her back to their home. Throughout the novel, he is presented as an example of gender stereotype.

Thus, Geetanjali Shree in *Tomb of Sand* has portrayed three types of women- courageous (Ma), independent (Beti) and traditional, but fearless (Bahu). All these three characters despite adverse circumstances, face the challenges dauntlessly. The novel can further be categorized as psychological and partition novel. Shree has even presented non-living things such as door, wall, border, statue of Buddha, cane etc as characters to convey her message. Her playfulness of words keeps the reader engaging throughout the novel.

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