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### Review of Geetanjali Shree's *Tomb of Sand*

Shree, Geetanjali. *Tomb of Sand*. Translated by Daisy Rockwell, Penguin Books, 2022. 696 pp. Rs. 691.

Reviewed By

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Transgressions abound in *Tomb of Sand*. In the novel, language, border, body, and memory all become “doors,” accommodating the increasing traversals of all its characters (Shree 29). Unlike Manto’s *Toba Tek Singh*, where place and identity overlap one another, making each “equally uncertain,” Geetanjali Shree’s novel employs “a rambunctious tone and structure” to dig into Chadraprabha Debi’s memory to deliver Chanda of Pakistan (Padamsee 2; cover copy). Translated from its Hindi version, *Ret Samadhi* (2018), *Tomb of Sand* won the 2022 International Booker Prize, a definite feat for a literary work originally written in an Indian language. To give credit where credit has been long due, Frank Wynne, chair of judges for the 2022 International Booker Prize, calls it “sui generis” while stating:

“in its linguistic contortions it evokes Don Quixote, in its discursive digressions it is reminiscent of Tristram Shandy, in its sense of the magical there are echoes of Jorge Luis Borges and Gabriel Garcia Marquez.” (The Booker Library)

Before reviewing the novel, it is essential to dwell upon a lesson put forth in the first chapter: “Anything worth doing transcends borders” (Shree 13). In *Tomb of Sand*, borders could mean anything from the LoC to chapters in the book. The first part begins with the risky business of dealing with Ma’s (Chandraprabha Debi) widowhood-induced depression with humor. Humor enables Shree to deconstruct her own childhood experiences of growing up in a civil-servant household and ask pertinent questions regarding authority, patriarchy, and traditions. But the novel is not really

concerned with these questions as much as it is with the art of transgression. Ma's back, entombed in the quilt, was like a wall to her family's requests to "get up!" (Shree 17). The language used to describe the hustle and bustle of her family members and their persistent endeavours at forcing her back into some sort of sustenance carries an anxious undertone that is fully realised after she disappears: "As the search deepens, the senses grow intemperate" (Shree 183). The first part is only the beginning of a sputtering language to evoke the family's "intemperate" anxieties at having realised that "Amma *really* was missing... "The rest of their lives would be spent asking themselves what else they had lost" (Shree 198).

Alka Saraogi suggests in her review of *Ret Samadhi* that "the second part is a great saga of the love of a daughter for her mother" (35). Ma, after being traced, temporarily moves from her son's house to her daughter's house, where she finds a lease on "new life," enabled by the swift transfer of roles between the mother and daughter (Shree 241). However, while Ma finds a new rhythm of life, the daughter finds herself "getting cooked" as she "just wasn't used to it" (Shree 298). In the meanwhile, Shree introduces Rosie Bua/Raza Master, a transgender character who inspires the novel's many transgressions, like "a body unrecognising of the legitimacy of any borders" (423). As Harish Trivedi rightly suggests, "Rosie/Raza threatens to run away with the novel" until Shree returns the narrative to two women instead of moving forward with two and a half.

The third part unfolds like a mystery. Ma rises from her tomb of sand, as if from amnesia, and embarks on a journey to find her husband, Ali Anwar, whom she had married when she was sixteen, back in Pakistan. Without legal documents, without a visa, but with her "heart of stone," Ma and her daughter go on an amusing adventure all around Pakistan, only to end up behind bars in Khyber. It might be confusing for readers to understand the motive of an eighty-year-old woman hoping to find closure for a relationship severed by the Partition, but Shree in an interview with Vighnesh Hampapura for *Scroll* tries to explain that maybe Ma has become selfish. Her old age allowed her to unburden herself of the

various responsibilities, roles, and rules she had to take care of. But to try and find a clear motive for her actions would be futile.

The novel has a few major characters, who are supported by a retinue of minor characters. However, most of the major characters are not named and are only referred to according to their relationship with Ma. We have Bade, the elder son, who is a civil servant in Delhi. We meet him when he too is transitioning into a new role as a retired civil servant, so his major concerns are to make better investments, although with Ma's pension, and to end Ma's vacation. Shree questions the many characteristics of men in Indian families: their fear of transgressions, their self-imposed responsibility of taking responsibility for everyone outside the family, and their inheritance of shouting (46). Even if she makes fun, she puts him under a microscope, turning the glass till different eccentricities emerge that dissipate into dreams dreamt on trees (Shree 451).

Beti, a modern woman in her own understanding, becomes a foil for Ma, wrapping her in "love that both fattens and starves" (Shree 35). When she and Ma reverse their mother-daughter roles, she is enveloped in a certain gloom of imposed motherhood where "no other desire, besides the desire to give one's child [Ma] everything," exists (Shree 241). The family and its responsibilities constantly agitate her, and she is driven to question her own identity and beliefs. When she realises her mother's appetite for transgressions is much stronger than her own, the gloom breaks, and she realises she is a secondary character in Ma's epic tale.

The many doors, the golden cane with its butterflies, the pathetic attempts of Overseas Son, Bahu's Reeboks, Sid's narrator friend, the crows, Delhi's environmental crises, the precarious lives of individuals occupying the margins of both state and gender, young boys of Pakistan wielding guns; enmesh with one another within the narrative. They aren't mere digressions; as Nikhil Govind suggests in his review of the novel in *The Wire*, these digressions allow Shree to deal with the seriousness of Partition with "both distance and intimacy, empathy, and a (rightfully) cultivated alienation."

The novel's polyphonic modes of narration and its unique use of language has received critical acclaim. French translator Annie Montaut reflects,

“The language was poetic, like a river – sometimes noiseless, sometimes gasping, and at times galloping. Some sentences were very long (a page or two in length) and some were no longer than a word. The voices also kept changing.” (*Scroll*)

Chapter 45 of Part Two allows readers to experience the traditional ways of Indian storytelling. In an interview with Vignesh Hampapura, Shree refers to the crows narrating the story, on lines with the *Panchatantra Tales* and its animal narrators as an influence on her novel. The story weaves a lot of tales together, leaving many incomplete, which might explain why certain reviewers like Reena Kapoor have felt as if the tale has been rushed, devoid of any actual dealing with the trauma of Partition, and tied up with loose ends. However, it is important to consider Shree’s stuttering narration as a way of dealing with the myriad confusions of our contemporary world, where:

“chaotic never-before odd couplings [abound]. Speak of this then this is the story, blend these cells with those then another story. This story belongs to these cells, and if you join some of these cells with those ones, you’ll get a different story. Join a belly with a back and get one story, a belly to a wall and get another, and peel the back away from the rest, and you get another and another and another.” (123)

Beyond the novel and its beauty lie a few issues that may not be specific to the novel but to Shree’s style of writing. As she believes in dealing with public issues through the “circuitous route of art, theater, and literature [which] can create an ambience receptive to other voices and ideas” her readers might be willing to ask how the sudden death of a hijra reflects on society’s perception of their lives (Shree, Outlook Web Desk). She does draw attention to the precariousness of their lives: “We are the grotesque, Baji.” Keep us away. If you see us, punch us. Did she die or did she survive, don’t even turn around to look. You can’t see what you didn’t see. We’ve always been missing, we’re forever missing” (Shree 482). And yet, a few pages later, after Rosie is dead, we are met with strange musings about her dead body at the morgue: “Artistry. A curiosity. A monstrosity. And those? Breasts or boils? And was that a penis at half-mast?” (Shree 511). It is difficult to gauge Shree’s intention in these lines; however, Rosie’s concerns about the fate of the transgender community in India stand caricatured.

The narrator of the story believes this tale will be told for generations to come, which might be an apt prediction of how the novel is going

to be received in future times. However, by the end, even if Ma is put to rest on a heroic note, Shree's readers are left in a lurch with the stories that are left sitting on the fence. To embrace the novel and its grandeur, readers will have to imagine these stories as moles and play a hearty game of "whack-a-mole-story" to move on.

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