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Reconstructing the Partition Hi(story): Between Sincerity and Satire in Geetanjali Shree's *Tomb of Sand (Ret Samadhi)*

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Abstract

This research paper positions Geetanjali Shree's International Booker Prize winner Hindi-language novel *Ret Samadhi* (2018), translated into English *Tomb of Sand* (2022) by Daisy Rockwell, as a metamodern text and tries to pitch the idea that this novel redraws partition boundaries illustrated in the Indian partition literature. This novel develops postmodern irony and metafiction into David Foster Wallace's brainchild *Post-Irony* and Lee Konstantinou's idea of *Credulous Metafiction* to establish *new sincerity* in Indian partition literature. An octogenarian grandmother, *Ma* or *Amma*, wishes to visit Pakistan and eventually not only succeeds in visiting her ancestral home in Lahore but also offers a new understanding of India's partition and boundaries between the two nations. The novel views India's partition tragedy from a metamodern perspective of oscillation between a modern enthusiasm and postmodern irony and portrays the partition as painful as it was in past or as alleviative as it can become at present. Self-reflexive irony in the novel constantly proposes new meanings of partition trauma highlighted in *Ma's* vagaries with a unique narrative strategy agglutinating the stories of modern urban life, history, folklore, environment, and womanhood with the main story. How a contemporary story on India's partition *oscillates* [Vermeulen and Van Den Akkar] between modern and postmodern interpretations of displacement seeking candour and authenticity with the help of its self-referential metafiction dubbed as 'Credulous Metafiction' by Lee Konstantinou to locate *New-Sincerity* [Adam Kelly] in partition literature is the major point discussed in this paper.

Keywords: Credulous Metafiction, Metamodern, New-sincerity, Partition, Post-irony.

Introduction

Partition literature, at present, seems to be evolving into significant thematic and narrative experimentation. Whereas modern writers remained fascinated with invoking communal unity in tragic separation, postmodern writers privileged plurality of partition misery and trauma. The emerging metamodern narrative, a new entrant in this dialectical hierarchy of partition documentation, re-writes the partition story by favouring the proliferation of tragedy over unity or plurality of human predicament during and after partition. *Tomb of Sand* tells the story of an eighty-year-old woman who gives new meaning to partition trauma and in times when partition literature is believed to have reached its exhaustive point, this story surprises everyone. Ma's decision to travel to Pakistan at such an old age and Shree's telling of this story with interwoven incessant sub-stories at once depolarize so many definitions and boundaries of partition literature. What could be the most innovative way to tell the partition story oscillating across modern hope and postmodern apathy even after seven decades of this tragedy, finds an apt expression and structure in Shree's hands. In a clear departure from modern political and postmodern apolitical approach towards partition literature, this novel takes a metamodern way to revisit trauma and displacement by reversing the roles of irony and metafiction to achieve coherence because "*understanding* [of partition] has become a much eroded, much-abused word, to the point that its sense has come to mean to *establish meaning* when its real sense is to *displace meaning*," (*Tomb of Sand* 177).

The first part of the story takes the readers into the domestic world of mother *Ma*, son *Bade*, daughter *Beti*, daughter-in-law *Bahu*, grandsons *Sid* and *Overseas Son*. The mundane activities of these family members, predominantly concentrated around old *Ma*, map their fears, taboos, grudges, and vagaries, and also contain the zeitgeist of culture, society, politics, pollution and customs of the day. Similarly in the Second part when *Ma* starts living with her outcast *Beti*, readers not only experience *Ma*'s transition from a fragile bed-ridden old woman to an assertive and hearty woman making most of the remaining days of her life but also get to know about the issues of

woman freedom, female sexuality and transgender identity explored through Ma's friend Rosie Bua, a transgender. This part ends with Ma's shocking declaration that she wants to visit Pakistan.

The third part starts with Ma and Beti at the Wagah border and the story somersaults from the poles of domestic sensibilities to the poles of partition displacement and trauma. Their expeditions in Pakistan make the border, "a horizon. Where two worlds meet and embrace" (*Tomb of Sand* 653) and readers realize that Shree had been constantly invoking this metamodern dimension of Indo-Pak separation through post-ironical and credulous metafictional elements since the beginning of the story when it was hard to have an inkling that an old woman will emerge as a focal point of partition narrative full of, in translator Daisy Rockwell's words, "modern urban life, ancient history, folklore, feminism, global warming, Buddhism, and much more" (*Tomb of Sand* 732). These episodes are woven interchangeably with metafictional chapters full of premonitions and intimations. The sub-stories in the novel (un)spooling the main story of Ma neither overshadow the main plot nor grow mere customary to churn out the closure of Ma's journey and trace exuberance and sincerity in partition tragedy to, "promise ... that the trauma of the past can be healed, or known — reformed at last" (Toth 46).

From Sincerity to New-Sincerity

Tomb of Sand offers a metamodern understanding of India's partition by extending irony into post-irony and making metafictional elements a source of textual self-referential humour to establish the coherent connections of new-sincerity to liberate the partition from trauma. The historical contexts and conditions of partition explored in stories sincerely documenting the misery of thousands of people are indeed impregnable. However, this narrative intensity/sincerity in partition literature seems to be plunged into a miasma of distinguished borders eventually unable to dissolve boundaries. New-sincerity, without repudiating the established [sincere] aspects of the partition saga, searches opportunities for converting historical into ahistorical or political into apolitical as far as new meanings of India's partition are concerned. Can the narratives of India vs. Pakistan; collective misery; moral implication or traumatic memories

in partition literature be rearranged into a discernible or original whole of displacement history? Can there be a new perspective, oscillating between negation and establishment of partition trauma, as if, “there are convergences and divergences between these [partition] conceptualizations; they complement each other as much as they compete” (“Postmodernism is Dead. What Comes Next?” Gibbons), or as if in Ma’s words that, “a border does not enclose, it opens out. It creates a shape ... it gives strength. It doesn’t tear apart. A border increases recognition. Where two sides meet and both flourish” (*Tomb of Sand* 652).

Both content and form in this novel originate from particular conditions of India’s partitions. Readerly experience oscillates between the components of modernity honouring boundaries and postmodernity defusing the notion of nations. At a time, the narrative grows confrontational and adamant to declare the authorial positions in analyzing partition tragedy but the very next moment an assurance of reaching an in-depth analysis of displacement seems visible, thus opening the “wide scope of the novel’s speculative world, carefully examining how the text confronts the readers with both its form (textual and physical) and the exaggerated, twisted, and often darkly comic version of” (Balliro 53) partition story. The attainment of sincerity through irony or the assimilation of humour and seriousness reveals Shree’s agenda of telling Ma’s story with the audacity to bend partition narrative both at the thematic as well as narrative level with a clear aim of attaining originality with the playfulness of the content and form.

The fun is really in the process of writing unless the writer has an agenda. If the writer has an agenda, then their whole agony is different. The process is what will lead to the whole structure. But that does not mean that one didn’t feel stuck or wondered how to proceed at times. (Shree qtd. in “Partition was Never Complete”)

The story oscillates between the tropes of Indian narrative tradition and the exhaustive boundaries of partition literature. It is embedded in excitement and monotony and conjointly traverses many worlds along with that of Ma’s world. The novel makes an excruciating readerly experience of modern urban life, cultural history, domesticity of traditional Indian families, global warming evoked through humdrum anecdotes of Ma’s renouncement of her

family, her son's life as an administrator, her daughter's choice of freedom at the cost of family, Ma's missing and her relation with Rosie. This new understanding of partition established behind discernible or indiscernible; coiled or uncoiled anecdotes remains at the centre of a new-sincerity which propagates that, "if there are limits and boundaries, then crossing them is also important," (Shree qtd. in "If there are limits and boundaries"). In this novel, boundaries are crossed in the story and the telling of the story as well.

From Metafiction to Credulous Metafiction

In practice, the use of irony to convert scepticism into authenticity may complicate readers' textual advances and inferences due to their inability to look beyond the deconstructive nature of irony and conditioning in postmodern incredulity. At the beginning of the story it seems difficult to decipher the ends of irony in Ma's predicament whether she is a victim in the family as, "she had grown tired of breathing for them, feeling their feelings," or an epitome of resurrection who, "neither stops for anyone, nor hesitates at any boundary," (*Tomb of Sand* 39). The Metafictional refrain here hints towards an unforeseen possibility in the story resonating with Vermeulen's observation that "the point here is not to make the reader believe, connect or immerse themselves in the reality but rather to suggest to them the possibility of a real world" (111). Certainly, it is the narrative technique which uses postmodern literary tools (inviting readers to create a fictive imagination) to reject postmodern fragmented content (jeopardizing Ma's actual position in the text). This simultaneous overt and covert use of fictionality of the fiction elevates metafiction, the dearest literary tool for ironical settings, to credulous metafiction.

The opening sentences of the story, "a tale tells itself. It can be complete, but also incomplete, the way all tales are," (*Tomb of Sand* 11) invite the readers to recognize metafictional elements in the narrative using, "postmodern form ... to reject postmodern content, either denying the validity of theories of postmodern reality, or more commonly trying to move beyond its failings" (Konstantinou 93). Similarly, the authorial confession by the end of the story, "world is in dire need of literature because literature is a source of hope and life. It seeks to erase its despair by revelling in unique ways of freeing

itself from the world that literature employs ... succeeds when the tale of a dying woman evolves into a story about her thriving and flourishing. Green patches of shoots and leaves greet the world amongst the rubble of destruction," (*Tomb of Sand* 698) highlights the use of fictionality of fiction to reconstruct readers' capability of finding conviction in confusion. This narrative strategy structures Ma's story oscillating across incessant poles but never lets the partition tragedy go out of sight and Shree's self-referential metafiction makes irony not a mere tool of showing Ma's predicament but a source of epiphany as Ma unexpectedly decides to cross borders.

Shree doesn't reveal her plan of taking the story to the realms of partition literature and readers are not exposed directly to the theme of the novel as the first two parts of Ma's story explain nothing about partition. However, she keeps reminding the readers, engrossed in a domestic story, about the unexpected turns. In an instance, when Ma goes missing, she speculates, "Who knows where a path will lead. If there were only one angle, one path, then the whole thing would be finished as soon as it started" (*Tomb of Sand* 177). Ma's story intertwined with cryptic and speculative chapters meanders through the episodes where Bahu's Reebok shoes become the source of commentary on consumerism; Bade's retirement ushers into a detailed description of Indian cuisines; candid moments of Ma and Beti suddenly transpires into the issue of global warming and at last, as per metafictional plan of the novel, during the conflict between son and daughter Ma unexpectedly declares that she wants to visit Pakistan.

These metafictional stories within the story destabilize not only the structure of the novel but also the ontological levels of partition trauma and displacement. By the time readers get used to the narrative haphazardness which seems to be settling at the juncture of the story where Ma at last starts living intently and lively with Beti, a sudden authorial claim that "the beginning begins at the beginning" (*Tomb of Sand* 324) forces readers to rummage through the previous chapters to ascertain their doubts that story is not entirely about an emotionally exhausted old lady and the very first metafictional statement in the text that, " this particular tale has a border and women who come and go as they please" (*Tomb of Sand* 11) clears this

doubt by initiating the readers into a partition story. Thus, two metafictional comments made across the gap of three hundred pages in the novel lead readers back and forth through the pages to destabilize the fictionality of fiction and, “use metafiction not to cultivate incredulity or irony but rather foster faith, conviction, immersion and emotional connection. Dissociated from irony, metafiction becomes a means of returning to ‘old-fashioned’ content” (Konstantinou 93).

By the time Ma and Beti reach Wagah border, previous intermittent ironical comments and situations narrated on the partition predicament start resurfacing, gaining originality and wholesomeness in defining Ma’s pain and trauma with certitude rather than pity. “The road they’re on is called the Grand Trunk Road. It comes this way and goes that way too” (*Tomb of Sand* 553) mitigating the sense of border with the use of irony. The incident of Ma’s killing is narrated twice in the story, first when, “a bullet came, punctured her body, shot through and out the other side,” (*Tomb of Sand* 13) with a metafictional addendum promising originality rather than irony in the story, “those who consider death to be an ending took this to be hers. But those in the know knew that this was no ending; knew she’d simply crossed yet another border” (*Tomb of Sand* 14). Second, by the end of the story with a prior warning that “the crux of the matter is that those who haven’t cared to read this far are advised not to read ahead either. But for those who relish colours and paths, why should they stop?” (*Tomb of Sand* 683) and, “at that very moment the big shadow screamed, Run! The little shadow did not run. It was eighty years old ... the bullet hit it from behind” (*Tomb of Sand* 698). This insertion of prior and subsequent metafictional comments by Shree, more than the playfulness of the narrative, lends credulity to a partition story trying to rise above trauma and pain.

The metafictional statement that, “every tale has haphazard elements, but such features aren’t necessarily hazardous,” (*Tomb of Sand* 59) repudiates its own burlesque irony and allows the reader to speculate a new originality in Ma’s journey to Pakistan with the vision that “if a story is stuck somewhere, it becomes evident that there’s more of it to be told,” (*Tomb of Sand* 82). How this story opens up into many credible understandings of partition within the range of postmodern ironical and metafictional elements is itself the

consolidation of the metamodern sensibility in a partition story unburdened from postmodern themes explored in the narratives of displacement and trauma. This is the metamodern narrative technique in which self-referential fiction becomes “credulous metafiction[which] uses the tools that cut short the relationship of the words to things (i.e. ‘reality’) precisely to try and put the two together again in whatever form it manages to muster, like a puzzle made with no instructions,” (Vermeulen 111).

Shree constantly and consciously allows the readers to participate in the narrative scheme of the novel. It may appear as a postmodern exercise but these fragmented and plural episodes of Ma’s story start collaborating to give a new meaning to partition tale with the use of metafiction and irony. Her experiment with the story and its telling, “try to convince us that what we initially thought was gimmicky experiments are elaborate attempts by the actual author, rather than the implied author, to communicate directly with us, “(Konstantinou 93) with a strong penchant to tell a partition tale free of all established apprehensions and convictions about memory, trauma and boundaries by making irony and metafiction constructive to attain new-sincerity.

A new form of metafiction which consciously destabilizes its fictionality, unlike the postmodern use of metafiction to intensify fictionality, inspires readers to attach to the narrative emotionally. The story consistently tells about itself and earnestly uses irony not to traumatize displacement but to mythically mitigate partition pain through Ma’s adventure with her daughter in Pakistan. This expedition ends with the killing of Ma by Pakistani soldiers in Khyber invoking many aspects of life and world; nationality and family; culture and tradition and language and art unfurling in different contexts and Shree like true, “metamodernists [who are] aware of political, economic, climatological, and other forms of chaos as is anyone else, but ... choose to remain optimistic and to engage communities proactively even when ... a cause has been lost” (Abramson 128) because, “when a country divides, enmity jostles amity and visas and borders depend on mood” (*Tomb of Sand* 532) probably on the line of new-sincerity to counter postmodern irony and its cynicism.

From Irony to Post-irony

Partition literature offers few consolations. The absurdity of India's partition has placed tragic irony at the centre of Indian partition literature evoking terror, pain and futility of human life. The iconic use of irony in partition literature creates incongruity between never ending socio-cultural miasma and the repose of compassion and credibility in partition narratives in accordance with David Foster Wallace's apprehensions that irony, "seemed downright socially useful in its capacity for what counterculture critics call a *critical negation* that would make it self-evident to everyone that the world is not as it seems ... serves an exclusively negative function" (*E Unibus Pluram: Television and U.S.Fiction* 183). Shree seems to be aware of the debilitating effects of irony, "you know perfectly well this has been a headache for both countries, that neither has been able to figure out to this day who has the right to live where, who belongs where, and whom the law favours" (*Tomb of Sand* 589) and draws morality even from the tropes of sustained violence and trauma in partition literature by extending the limits of irony into post-irony where, "the distaste [of partition trauma] may well remain, but the distance [between two countries] has not," (Wallace, *Fictional Futures and the Conspicuously Young*, 5).

In a clichéd setting of partition literature where a displaced octogenarian woman can easily become the ideal weapon to exert trauma and misery of displacement, Ma's decision to visit Pakistan comes as a surprise to the family members and readers also. Her belief that "when a country divides enmity jostles amenity and visas and borders depend on the mood," (*Tomb of Sand* 532) is as ironic as the plight of thousands of Indians who want to visit Pakistan in their last days but never get the opportunity and as assertive as to unburden the partition story from painful experience. The most crucial moment of the story, "Ma is asking Bade for passport. *Pakistan*. When Amma said it, everyone in shock" (*Tomb of Sand* 527), ironically narrated by the author "even at this age, desire is desire, and why should anyone die without giving a shot," (*Tomb of Sand* 527) becomes thoroughly thoughtful when Bade says, "how far Pakistan is, Amma, it's so far! At which Amma got bit annoyed," and says, "It is where it is. We're the ones who are far," (*Tomb of Sand* 528) infusing new-sincerity into irony. Ma's visit to Pakistan evokes

playfulness; celebration of fragmentations; acceptance of displacement and ironic deconstruction of borders for the earnest ends resonating with Berel Lang's observation that:

One ironic turn opens the way to another and that one opens on still another, with no nonironic end in sight except for the ironic consciousness itself with its denial of any stopping point that might interrupt its continuing reflection. On this view, irony initiates (more precisely, takes place in) an infinite movement, perhaps regress, perhaps progress that violates the supposed boundaries of every context in which it appears: it is irony that irony affirms, not just this or that single turn. (571)

Magic realism evoked with the incarnations of partition writers at Wagah border expands the ironical dimensions of displacement and violence of partition to an earnest level and this chapter marking the beginning of Ma's journey to Pakistan becomes the most important episode in the story liberating irony from cynicism and solemnizes partition scepticism into sincerity. The whole league of partition writers and the characters created in their partition stories are incarnated as the audience watches the parade at the exact moment when Ma and Beti are about to cross the India-Pakistan boundary. Shree pitches the idea that partition truths are not unconditional and can be changed according to the situation with the help of irony itself. Shree obfuscates and traverses two domains of cynicism and sincerity simultaneously by invoking partition writers and their protagonists with full awareness of the fictionality in, "there sits Intizar Hussain Sahib writing *Basti*," (*Tomb of Sand* 536) "Krishna Sobti forging ahead, as though fashioning new borders," (*Tomb of Sand* 537) "Khuswant Singh, growling like a tiger," (*Tomb of Sand* 541) and "Bhisham Sahni ji stands at the gate staring in astonishment," (*Tomb of Sand* 541).

She deftly uses irony in telling the partition story by recollecting history to obfuscate the reality of time and space in India's partition ideally fixed at the Wagah border to, "define irony as ethos, a stance that interprets the world and language via a corrosive practice of symptomatic, sceptical or paranoid reading," (Konstantinou 88). Shree, by declaring that, "here we are at Wagah, where the tale is drama and the story is partition," (*Tomb of Sand* 535), opens the possibility of analyzing trauma and pain with a modified sense of

irony in Wallace's words that, "we have an innate predilection for visual stimulation ... we experience a degree of manipulation as neutral, a fact of life," (Wallace, *Fictional Futures and the Conspicuously Young*, 5). She says the unsayable in accepting that the parade at the Wagah border is not necessarily a symbol of the two-nation theory because as far as the parade is concerned, "no one is an enemy during rehearsal. There must have been laughter and joking. You'll kick your leg so high ... as if you're going to kick yourself in the head, then I'll kick as if I'm going bust my own head," creating confusion that, "is it a fight or a game," (*Tomb of Sand* 543).

This reversed use of irony designates the effort to defuse socio-political miasma in partition writings because, "postironists don't advocate a simple return to sincerity — they are not anti-ironists — but rather wish to preserve postmodernism's critical insights (in various domains) while overcoming its disturbing dimensions," (Konstantinou 88). Blustering parade by the soldiers of both nations loses its sheen and seriousness by its ironical documentation when, "the guards in the crested turbans were in a great hurry to execute their duty correctly, though they hid their haste," but in the very next moment, Shree muddles this irony with earnestness when, "they'd already shaken hands with one another with excessive alertness, as if to say, Buddy, it's you and me together today; the enemy is some third party," (*Tomb of Sand* 546).

Contrary to readerly expectations, Ma inherits a new role and unlike envisaged break-downs and severe nostalgia, she starts challenging the gloomy atmosphere of reunion in a post-ironical way during an interrogation by a Pakistani police officer who reads Ma's name on her passport as Chandraprabha Devi and Ma claims that she is Chanda of undivided India.

[Officer asks] This name is not in your passport. [Ma replies] Chanda was sent off without a passport. [Officer asks] You have no visa. [Ma replies] Chanda was sent away without a visa. [Officer asks] Your address is in India, which is very far from here. [Ma replies] It is where it is, you're the one who's far, son. [Officer asks] I'm from here, you've travelled here. [Ma replies] No, son, I didn't come here, I left here. (*Tomb of Sand* 628)

Ma is a victim of partition. Her resurrection as a lone octogenarian woman who chooses to go back to the country of her

origin and her response in this conversation muddles comic and serious together and immediately takes the readers to the first chapter of the novel where it was propounded by the author that this partition story is no way doomed to be ended on a predestined order but in fact, “a story is created, changes, flows, free from this side to that” (*Tomb of Sand* 683). Once it becomes clear that this back journey of Chandraprabha Devi or Chanda to Pakistan, “will jump, it will cross over, the story will not end” (*Tomb of Sand* 579), the idea of writing a partition story based on ironical treatments achieves the next level where, “irony is not something in an object that you either “get” or fail to “get”: irony “happens” for you (or, better, you make it “happen”) when two meanings, one said and the other unsaid, come together, usually with a certain critical edge” (Hutcheon, 22). The parody and cynicism of being divided into two countries and of two identities fall flat in front of Ma’s even more ironical statement that, “a border is not created to be removed. It is meant to illuminate both sides” (*Tomb of Sand* 652), and oscillates between modernist hope and postmodern fragmentation neither removing border nor accepting its demarcations.

Ma’s paranoid conversations are full of ironical elements as it becomes clear that her answers to the investigating officer will not fetch her freedom and confusion is created that when such an old woman can convincingly decide to visit Pakistan then why she doesn’t put her answers straight. She creates a linguistic dystopia where irony becomes the tool of criticizing irony to lend a metamodern authenticity to the issues of nations and borders. Her plight reminds me of Manto’s *Toba Tek Singh* who is ironically stranded across two nations and his denial of the border between India and Pakistan trivializes the notion of partition not to highlight postmodern cynicism but to infuse originality in the partition narrative as Ma states, “why I should have a visa? I never had one before, why should I have one at this age?” (*Tomb of Sand* 651) and perhaps, “designates the effort to move beyond the problems that irony has created for contemporary life and culture” (Konstantinou 88). The extension of irony into post-irony underlines the ascent of irony from cynicism to positivism as a literary device and relates to the broader meanings of socio-cultural events to liberate stories, as in

the case of this novel, from cliché-ridden thematic as well as narrative scheme.

Conclusion

Geetanjali Shree, most fundamentally, allocates new dimensions to the post (modern) dialectic of partition trauma and boundaries by necessitating a new metamodern rise in partition stories. *Tomb of Sand* neither abhors poignancy nor celebrates the plurality of partition; neither abandons modern doubts nor criticizes postmodern playfulness in partition aftermaths. *Ma's* visit to Pakistan in search of her identity typically opposes the modern utopias of partition like a true postmodern but at the same time with a sincere belief, like that of a modern, in postmodern criticality registered in partition narratives. *Ma's* visit to Pakistan remains complete and incomplete also like the metamodern oscillation in which the irony of her pain and trauma is poignant and self-critical simultaneously. This results in the documentation of the tragedy of partition with the help of postmodern negation and modern sincerity equally contesting with each other.

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