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# Metamorphosis and Memory: Rewriting Selfhood in Geetanjali Shree's *Tomb of Sand*

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Geetanjali Shree's *Tomb of Sand* (2024), originally written in Hindi as *Ret Samadhi* and translated into English by Daisy Rockwell, emerges as a landmark achievement in contemporary Indian literature, offering a profoundly meditative exploration of identity, memory, and the transformative potential inherent in human experience. The novel refuses to adhere to linear or conventional narrative structures, instead embracing a fluid, experimental approach that melds the ordinary with the philosophical. Anchored by the journey of an octogenarian protagonist, Ma, the text interrogates the processes through which selfhood is continually reconstructed in response to trauma, history, and personal acts of defiance. Shree's narrative demonstrates that the path to wholeness does not entail erasing the imprints of past suffering but involves embracing and integrating these experiences into a renewed sense of self.

From the outset, the novel's stylistic expansiveness, its playful yet precise use of language, shifting perspectives, and rich metaphorical density, embody the very concept of metamorphosis it seeks to portray. As Francesca Orsini notes in *The Hindi Public Sphere 1920–1940: Language and Literature in the Age of Nationalism* (2002),

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modern Hindi fiction progressively foregrounds interiority and formal experimentation; Shree advances this lineage by treating language itself as a dynamic and transformative space in which identity and perception remain open to continual renegotiation. Daisy Rockwell's translation further enhances this dynamic, transforming the act of translation itself into a form of metamorphosis that negotiates meaning across linguistic, cultural, and emotional registers. In this sense, the novel's linguistic playfulness mirrors its thematic preoccupation with the fluidity of selfhood.

Central to the novel's symbolic framework are recurring motifs such as sand, borders, and sunlight. Sand, a seemingly simple image, evokes impermanence, fragmentation, and continual reshaping, reflecting Ma's evolving selfhood and the wider human capacity for renewal. Borders function both as political demarcations and psychological thresholds, marking the intersection of personal and collective histories. Sunlight, recurring throughout the narrative, suggests illumination, vitality, and the emergence of consciousness from the shadow of grief. Together, these symbols form a dense interpretive network that underscores the novel's concern with fluidity – not only of identity but also of memory, experience, and historical consciousness.

At the emotional and philosophical heart of the novel stands Ma, whose withdrawal following her husband's death initially suggests decline but gradually reveals itself as a profound reconfiguration of identity. In the context of Indian society, where widowhood has historically signified social erasure, Ma's journey is a radical assertion of agency. As Uma Chakravarti notes in her feminist critique of Brahmanical patriarchy, widows have long been pushed to the peripheries of social life, their voices muted and their identities constrained (112). Shree overturns this logic through Ma, whose silence becomes not an erasure but a profound site of self-reflection, imaginative resurgence, and transformative rebirth. With the encouragement of her daughter, Beti, and the unconventional but vibrant Rosie Bua, Ma reconstructs her identity, challenging entrenched expectations linked to age, gender, and familial roles. Her

transformation illustrates the novel's central assertion: that identity is not static but malleable, capable of continual reinvention.

The narrative reaches a pivotal juncture when Ma decides to cross the border into Pakistan. Rather than presenting this journey as a mere physical traversal, Shree frames it as an engagement with memory, history, and the legacies of Partition. Scholars such as Urvashi Butalia, in *The Other Side of Silence: Voices from the Partition of India (1998)* and Gyanendra Pandey, in *Remembering Partition: Violence, Nationalism and History in India* (2001), have demonstrated that women's experiences of Partition remain largely obscured within official historical narratives. Shree's novel intervenes in this critical gap by foregrounding Ma's suppressed past as Chanda, thereby revealing the intimate ways in which personal memory intersects with national history. Through this revelation, Ma's layered identities, Chanda, Chandraprabha Devi, and Ma, are shown to exist as a continuum shaped by trauma, resilience, and renewal, highlighting the novel's feminist and historiographical interventions.

Beti, Ma's daughter, complements and contrasts her mother's narrative arc. Free-spirited, intellectually curious, and independent, Beti embodies the evolving gender dynamics of contemporary India. Her journey is not simply one of rebellion against patriarchal norms but rather of reconciliation with history, family, and selfhood. Drawing on Susie Tharu's reflections in *Women Writing in India* (1993) on how women narrativise their lived experiences beyond patriarchal frameworks, the relationship between Ma and Beti reveals how alternative kinship models can challenge entrenched hierarchies and enable the flourishing of female subjectivity. Their relationship, marked by empathy and mutual transformation, illustrates how narratives of renewal are deeply relational, contingent upon the interactions between self and other, past and present.

Equally transformative is Rosie Bua, whose presence as a vibrant transgender character destabilizes fixed notions of identity. Rosie embodies fluidity, queerness, and the defiance of normative boundaries, functioning both as a catalyst and companion in Ma's journey toward self-renewal. Her dynamic persona aligns with Judith Butler's theorization of performativity in *Gender Trouble* (1990), which posits that identity emerges through repeated acts rather than fixed

attributes, thereby resisting any static or essential classification. By integrating Rosie's narrative, Shree broadens the novel's engagement with marginality and inclusion, suggesting that selfhood is inherently relational, porous, and capable of infinite reinvention.

The novel's expansive, digressive structure mirrors its thematic concerns. While its wandering form may challenge readers accustomed to linear storytelling, this very fluidity enacts the unsettled nature of memory and identity. Shree's narrative meanders, interrupts itself, and shifts perspectives, inviting readers to inhabit the provisional, transformative spaces that memory and history produce. Storytelling, in *Tomb of Sand*, becomes an act of reclamation: a means to give voice to those previously silenced and to redraw the boundaries of belonging.

Viewed through the lens of contemporary literary theory, *Tomb of Sand* assumes a crucial place in modern Indian literature, interrogating the afterlives of Partition, the layered complexities of gendered existence, and the fundamentally fluid nature of identity. Engaging with Urvashi Butalia's *The Other Side of Silence* (1998) and Francesca Orsini's *The Hindi Public Sphere, 1920–1940* (2002), and drawing on Paul Ricoeur's meditations on narrative identity in *Time and Narrative* (1983), Homi K. Bhabha's theorization of cultural hybridity in *The Location of Culture* (1994), and Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak's seminal intervention in *Can the Subaltern Speak?* (1988), Shree's novel emerges as a luminous exploration of hybrid selfhood – one shaped in the interstices between past and present, silence and articulation, nation and exile. Ma, Beti, and Rosie collectively dismantle rigid architectures of patriarchy, heteronormativity, and nationalism, offering a vision of identity as a constantly evolving continuum. The novel's philosophical depth and emotional resonance affirm the enduring capacity of storytelling to reimagine history, restore agency, and illuminate the transformative potential of human experience.

Shree's novel also prompts reflection on the nature of storytelling itself. Narratives, like identities, are mutable, recursive, and permeable. By eschewing teleological plots, the novel mirrors the drift of memory and the fragmentation inherent in lived experience. Aijaz Ahmad, in *In Theory: Classes, Nations, Literatures* (1992), argues

that postcolonial Indian literature frequently unfolds within layered and non-linear temporalities, resisting singular closure in favour of multiplicity, recursion, and narrative dispersal. Echoing this insight, Shree structures her novel around the recognition that identity itself is a constructed and continually shifting terrain; age, gender, nationality, and kinship appear not as fixed categories but as fluid formations that can be destabilised, reimagined, and ultimately subverted.

The political dimension of *Tomb of Sand* is inseparable from its personal, emotional, and philosophical inquiries. Partition functions not as a mere historical backdrop but as an active, shaping presence that informs Ma's evolving sense of self and her fraught relationship with memory. As Gyanendra Pandey argues in *Remembering Partition: Violence, Nationalism and History in India*, the memory of Partition endures not through official documentation but through the affective, embodied recollections of those who lived through its violence. Shree's narrative echoes this insight, foregrounding the intimate, lived textures of historical trauma as central to Ma's metamorphosis. Ma's journey into Pakistan represents a symbolic return to the site of trauma, an engagement with suppressed memories, and a confrontation with the legacies of colonial and national histories. Through this act, Shree critiques hegemonic historical narratives, privileging personal truth, emotional resonance, and ethical remembering.

The novel further subverts conventional perceptions of ageing. Whereas old age is frequently depicted as a period of decline, invisibility, or marginalisation, Shree reimagines it as a stage of radical possibility, creative vitality, and intellectual awakening. As Margaret Morganroth Gullette observes in *Agewise: Fighting the New Ageism in America* (2011), cultural anxieties often impose narratives of diminishment upon the elderly, constraining their social and personal agency. By foregrounding Ma's late-life transformation, Shree contests these limiting scripts, portraying ageing instead as a fertile terrain for self-reinvention and renewed engagement with the world. Shree subverts this narrative by portraying Ma's late-life metamorphosis as the most vital and creative phase of her existence. This approach not only enriches the literary discourse on ageing but

also expands the possibilities for the representation of elder characters within South Asian literature.

In *Tomb of Sand*, language itself emerges as a pivotal site of transformation. Through its shifting tones, idiomatic play, and nested narratives, Shree exemplifies what Alok Rai identifies as the "multilingual imagination" characteristic of modern Hindi literature (67). Here, language is not merely a vehicle for storytelling; it becomes a living, breathing entity, elastic, unpredictable, and generative, capable of shaping consciousness, identity, and perception as dynamically as the narrative it conveys. Rockwell's translation respects and extends this linguistic vitality, demonstrating how translation can function as an act of co-creation rather than mere transfer. In this regard, the novel engages with a broader global discourse on translation and the politics of linguistic representation, resonating with Lawrence Venuti's call for translator visibility and the creative labour inherent in the act of translation (1–14). Through Daisy Rockwell's inventive rendering of Shree's multilingual and experimental prose, translation itself becomes a performative and transformative act, shaping meaning as dynamically as the original text.

Borders – whether literal, cultural, or emotional – emerge as a central motif in the novel, framing both movement and transformation. Homi K. Bhabha's concept of the "third space," as articulated in *The Location of Culture*, resonates profoundly throughout Ma's journey, revealing a liminal realm where identities intersect, collide, and are continually reconstituted beyond fixed binaries. The liminality of borders facilitates encounters with multiplicity, hybridity, and transformation. Ma's movement across domestic, national, and psychological thresholds occurs within these liminal zones, emphasising that identity thrives in spaces of negotiation and intersection rather than rigid confinement. In this context, borders function simultaneously as sites of rupture and spaces of possibility.

The novel's engagement with queer identity, exemplified by Rosie Bua, amplifies its challenge to normative categories. Rosie's fluid gender expression destabilises conventional notions of selfhood and community, enriching the novel's discourse on marginality and inclusion. Scholars such as Kareem Khubchandani, in his studies on

queer South Asian performance, observe that marginalised sexual identities often navigate social norms through performative negotiation and adaptive expression (45–67). Rosie vividly embodies this dynamic, revealing the interplay of personal agency, social constraint, and affective community formation. Through her character, Shree reconceptualises kinship and relationality, envisioning modes of connection that transcend traditional patriarchal frameworks and conventional familial hierarchies. Familial dynamics further reveal the novel's interrogation of patriarchal structures. Bade, Ma's son-in-law, exemplifies the tension between tradition and evolving social norms. Although initially characterised by rigidity, Bade's gradual adaptation signals the potential for a reimagined masculinity. R.W. Connell's concept of hegemonic masculinity, with its inherent vulnerabilities, offers a compelling framework for understanding his evolving trajectory (71–102). Through such nuanced characterisations, Shree interrogates the interplay between social structures and individual agency, demonstrating that personal transformation remains possible even within systems that appear ostensibly inflexible.

Ultimately, *Tomb of Sand* is a text of philosophical, emotional, and ethical depth. Its commitment to multiplicity, of memory, identity, and narrative form, positions it as a significant contribution to contemporary literature, both within India and internationally. By weaving together individual histories and collective trauma, and by interrogating social hierarchies through richly drawn characters, Shree affirms the capacity of literature to illuminate unseen truths and expand the horizons of human experience. The novel's refusal to be reduced to singular meanings underscores its thematic concern with becoming. Identity, in Shree's vision, is not a fixed inheritance but an evolving continuum, shaped by experience, memory, relationality, and the courage to transgress boundaries. Through *Tomb of Sand*, readers are invited into an immersive exploration of selfhood, an odyssey that traverses history, trauma, love, and renewal. By portraying life as a continuous process of transformation, Shree compels us to reconsider the parameters of identity, the nature of memory, and the enduring power of narrative to shape and reshape human understanding.

As a final reflection, Geetanjali Shree's *Tomb of Sand* stands as a masterwork that melds intellectual rigour with emotional resonance. Its experimental narrative structure, philosophical depth, and empathetic character portrayals render it a groundbreaking contribution to world literature. Through the intertwined journeys of Ma, Beti, and Rosie, the novel challenges readers to embrace multiplicity, confront historical and personal traumas, and recognise the transformative potential inherent in every life. By rendering the fluidity of identity, memory, and narrative, Shree not only affirms the regenerative power of human experience but also situates her work firmly within the global literary imagination as a testament to the enduring possibilities of storytelling.

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