

Narrative Disruptions and Fluid Identities in Geetanjali Shree's *Tomb of Sand* (2022)

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Abstract


Borders are defined as lines that divide and demarcate areas - physical and abstract - but occasionally borders merge to create a canvas of overlapping memories. Geetanjali Shree's novel *Tomb of Sand* (2022), translated into English from *Ret Samadhi* (2018), became the first Indian novel translated into English to win The Booker Prize in 2022. It is a richly layered narrative that challenges conventional storytelling by embracing fragmentation, multiplicity, and linguistic play. This paper offers a narrative analysis of the novel through the lens of Jean-François Lyotard's *petit récits* (small narratives), exploring how the text subverts the grand narratives of history, identity, and nationhood. The story revolves around an eighty-year-old protagonist who navigates her way into her past after the death of her husband. Through linguistic play and its refusal of neat resolutions, the novel offers a postmodern critique of rigid demarcations, urging a rethinking of binaries that define gender, memory, and nationhood as fluid and process-based. In doing so, it positions itself as a literary intervention in contemporary South Asian fiction. This paper argues that *Tomb of Sand* exemplifies a postmodern literary paradigm in which the act of storytelling becomes an act of defiance, embracing multiplicity and fluidity over fixed ideological constructs.

Keywords

Border; identity; gender; memory; narrative.

Geetanjali Shree's *Tomb of Sand* (2022), translated by Daisy Rockwell from her Hindi novel *Ret Samadhi* (2018), received international recognition when it was awarded the Booker Prize in 2022. The novel engages with complex themes of history, identity and nationhood through an octogenarian protagonist attempting to retrace her personal history through the violence and bloodshed that unfolded during the partition of the subcontinent. As the plot progresses, multiple narratives and personal stories from several other characters in the novel come together, to form a pluralistic, and multi-stranded narrative that resists universalising and dominant discourses of history.

The paper analyses different aspects like memory, family, and stereotypical gender roles, all of which converge eventually into a story of love. Through narrative analysis of the novel that extends Jean-François Lyotard's concept of *petit récits* (small narratives) to the textual structure, this paper examines the way the novel resists overarching metanarratives of history, identity, and nationhood. Lyotard's critique of totalizing discourses and the prioritising of smaller, personal narratives as important in retaining the pluralism of human experience finds resonance in the *Tomb of Sand*, which privileges discontinuity, heterogeneity, and

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localized experiences over singular, unified truths as representations of reality.

About the Author

Geetanjali Shree is a Hindi novelist and short story writer who rose to prominence in 2001 with *Mai* being shortlisted for the Crossword Book Award. This was translated into English by Nita Kumar, won the Sahitya Akademi award and was later translated into Korean, French, German and other languages as well. Her debut tale, *Bel Patra*, appeared in the literary journal *Hans* in 1987 and her collection of short stories, *Anugoonj*, appeared in 1991. *Tomb of Sand* is Shree's fifth novel. It has a lyrical quality as it narrates the significance of stories that never end. It chronicles the life of an eighty-year-old protagonist who embarks on a journey to confront the traumatic memories of the partition where she was separated from her first love. Despite the nature of the theme and plot, the novel uses humor through its use of language to explore the themes of gender, partition, memory, trauma, hypocrisy and humanism in their truest forms.

Some recent critiques of the work include Sanket Kumar Jha and A.K. Bachchan's research "Geetanjali Shree's *Tomb of Sand* as a Representative Postmodern Fiction" that analyses characteristic features of postmodernism present in the novel like metafiction, intertextuality, fabulation, magic realism and others, to comprehensively understand the text and its place in postmodern fiction. J.K. Meena's article "The epic story of an extraordinary woman hidden in an ordinary woman '*Ret Samadhi*'" examines the characterisation of the protagonist within the larger framework of discrimination of caste, gender, religion and partition.

The Plot, its Form and Meaning: Maa's Withdrawal and/as Symbolic Death

The novel centres around an octogenarian referred to as Maa. Her real name is Chanda, as is revealed in the last part of the novel when she is interrogated by authorities. The novel starts with the death of her husband after which she becomes a

recluse and remains confined to her bed. The novel starts in a household and the first part of the novel focuses on the life of an old woman who seems depressed due to her husband's death, depicted through a realistic representation of her household, family members, and their relationships. The character of Bade as the responsible elder son in a patriarchal set-up, the progressive rebellious Beti, Bahu who constantly complains about her life and an overseas son who has been an over-achiever but has forgotten to enjoy the simple pleasures of life comprise some members of this household.

After the death of her husband, Maa constantly gazes at the wall and refuses to be a part of the family anymore. Her family members assume that she is in depression after her husband's death. Mere sounds of footsteps, for instance, would make her turn her back and she would pretend to be dead, "eyes and nose closed, ears shut, mouth sewn, mind numb, desires extinct" (20). Maa refuses to talk and participate in the household. The novel highlights the polysemic nature of language in this instance, via a play of sound and words where the syllables of Maa's utterances in her refusal are transformed phonetically to acquire multiple meanings: "No, no I won't get up. Noooooo, I won't rise nowwww. Nooo rising nyoww. Nyoooo riiisee nyoooo. Now rise new. Now, I will rise anew." (21). The play on sound, words and meaning infuses new meanings into the narrative, turning her 'no' into a 'now', transforming them from refusal to action. Another instance of this tendency can be seen in the novelistic use of common names of relationships to designate characters. Her son, Bade, her daughter-in-law Bahu, her cheerful grandson Sid and an overseas grandson (on the phone) all attempt to jog her back to normalcy. Their concerns, some real and others fake, and their selfish interests merged with their sympathies highlight essential human natures in a realistic mode. At the same time, the use of relationship markers instead of first names indicate simultaneously the way one equates individual identities as relational ones and the generalisation of these relationships as possibly universal, despite the uniqueness of Maa's situation and story.

New Beginnings: Beti and Rosie

While a large section of the first part of the novel focuses on Maa in her 'samadhi', constantly reducing in size, she eventually moves in with her daughter, referred to as 'Beti' in the text. Beti is depicted as a progressive feminist whose unusual ways offended her brother who doesn't talk to her. However, after her work is recognized and she has dinner with the President, everyone's attitude towards her softens. She volunteers to take care of her mother after she is lost for a few days in a mysterious manner. At Beti's place, she has a frequent visitor, Rosie, who is a transgender with whom Maa is unusually friendly and in whose company she starts recovering.

When Rosie and Maa's friendship leads to the latter's gradual recovery, Beti starts feeling jealous of their relationship and secrets. Maa has to make two visits to the hospital, one after a fall and another due to the growth of a cyst. Rosie is the sole comforter for Maa in her usual flamboyant way. After Rosie's disappearance and subsequent murder, however, Maa again recoils to her former state, but reemerges like a phoenix demanding to visit Pakistan. Beti accompanies Maa across the border only to discover Maa's past, which she finds hard to believe.

Maa's Past: Maa and Beti in Pakistan

Beti discovers that Maa, i.e, Chanda, was married to Anwar but in the communal clashes after the partition, she was forced to flee her home. She was forced to board a truck that had other girls in it, and there she first met Rosie as a young child. She managed to escape in the storm of Thar along with Rosie, and was able to avoid the fate of several women whose bodies became territories to be exploited by frenzied men on both sides. Rosie's bond with Maa unfolds in the last part of the text. Maa is taken as a prisoner with Beti as she had travelled to a place without a visa and was in possession of a statue of the Buddha that she regards as a protective talisman. She finds Anwar, now paralysed, and visits him in the darkness of the night where they appear as two lovers reunited. Maa is eventually shot in the back and Beti returns to India.

Identity in *Tomb of Sand*: Between the Universal and Particular

The theme of identity recurs throughout the novel and is explored through memory and associations with places and people. Chanda belonged to Pakistan and had been married to Anwar, though after the partition she remarried and had a 'normal' life in India with her children and grandchildren. It is only when her husband dies that she relapses into memories and journeys backwards in time. Partition and borders, therefore, play a symbolic role in the novel:

A tale tells itself. It can be complete, but also incomplete, the way all tales are. 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 ... (11)

Beti symbolises the revolutionised feminists who are progressive in their approach as they question social and cultural borders of propriety. When compared to Maa and her life's journey, however, Beti's ideas appear less radical. Bahu considers herself a sacrificial lamb whose efforts have been ignored by the whole family, except her Overseas son. She tries to regain her identity by joining a yoga group and then becoming a trainer, though she constantly struggles in the profession. Bade is a typical elder son, cast as the provider for the family and fulfilling all the responsibilities that accompany it. His vulnerability is divulged only at the end of the novel when he forms a friendship with a crow, thereby exposing his need for the emotional support that his relationships fail to provide. Maa becomes the 'other' when she refuses to conform to expected behaviour and goes to Pakistan. In each instance, individual identities are juxtaposed and tussle with social expectations of roles and responsibilities, their boundaries merging and receding.

In a society that continues to be patriarchal, the relationship between women characters in the novel depicts the pervasiveness of these structures. The mother-daughter relationship in the novel is unconventional and is marked by an evident role

reversal. In the first chapter, for instance, Shree confesses that this is a story of two women, as well as others who keep moving in and out of the frame of the story. She elaborates further on daughters as an identity of womanhood, reiterating that “all women, don’t forget, are daughters.” (37). The prose of the text becomes poetic as she dwells on daughters being constituted of “wind and air; invisible even in moments of stillness”. The parents become children as their age advances and the nature of the relationship evolves with time but the love between a parent and child, according to the novel “can make God fade into the background” (40).

The novel delves into the mother-daughter relationship in a rare manner, where the mother supports the daughter during a rebellious phase of her life, secretly helping her while the family boycotts her due to her writings on subjects such as female sexuality.

Maa was a great supporter of Beti when she rebelled against patriarchal norms, supporting her in evolving as a woman. Maa would sneak snacks out to Beti in the darkness of the night with the same ease with which she gave her Banarasi sari when Beti had to attend her friend’s wedding. Their rendezvous in the dark night is described by Shree as the ‘romance of the century’. Conversely, the daughter assumes the role of the mother when she starts taking care of her mother. She bathes, dresses, cooks and cleans for her, thereby revealing the way, “all egotism and success on one side, mother-daughter on the other. There’s no pride like a mother’s pride. Beti became the mother, and Maa the daughter...” (241)

Maa is unaffected by the presence of KK, Beti’s boyfriend, and even enjoys his company over drinks. This breaks the conservative mould of the depiction of the mother, and her daughter is surprised by the affinity between her mother and boyfriend. Beti is intrigued by her mother’s ability to strike up a conversation and develop a friendly relationship with everyone: watchman, neighbours, birds and others. There are moving personal scenes that the writer depicts in an unusual manner when Maa’s cyst bursts, for instance, she starts to bleed and Beti is busy getting sanitary pads and folding them

in newspapers while Maa giggles. It captures the deep bond between mother and daughter, with a reversal of care-giver and care-given.

The mother selects her daughter as her companion for her journey to Pakistan. As they cross the border, the persona of the mother changes and she becomes increasingly nostalgic. Beti thinks that Maa is thinking of her past with Rosie, only to realise later that Maa was thinking of herself and her past in the narrow lanes of Pakistan. The last part also reveals the panic Beti feels when they are confined to a house by Pakistani officials. While Maa is unperturbed by the officials’ constant probing, Beti longs for KK and her normal life in India. She feels agitated by Maa and her behaviour. This binary of the parent-child, in this case, mother-daughter is presented and the interchange of the roles contributes to the border crossings and merging, with each becoming the other in different contexts.

The fluidity of the narrative is enhanced through magical realism and the use of language that juxtaposes the real and the imaginary to create a mood of expansiveness and disruption of the ordinary. The writer intervenes in the plot and remarks, “All these are characters in this story: the bug, the elephant, the compassion, the door, Maa, the cane, the bundle, Bade, Beti, the Reeboks that Bahu wore...” (65). The Overseas son buys a cane and Bahu gives it to Maa, this cane appears to be a catalyst as Maa leaves her bed and walks away. As she recovers, the cane becomes a part of her personality as she uses it to walk and eventually discards it as she doesn’t need it anymore. At different points, butterflies spring out of the cane, echoing a Marquezian magical realism. When she returns to the same desert, she sits down for long intervals to tell tales of her past. As she does, “[t]he butterfly slipped back into the cane” (603).

Similar effects accompany the crows and their appearance in the novel. In Hindu mythology, crows were considered to be the messengers of the dead. In different mythologies, they have come to represent different symbols and ideas, like in Greek mythology they are oracles to predict the future. In

this novel too, amidst the many digressions and curves the story takes, some are crows. They first appear on the branch of the tree Bade climbs to peep in the balcony of his sister to see his Maa. There is a group of crows in the tree who gather to discuss issues like philosophy, poetry, the Swachha Bharat campaign and the like. When they are disturbed due to Bade, chaos ensues which is set right by the elderly crowess who had been a 'badass feminist' of her times and who asks all of them to empathize with Bade. Bade thinks of all the saris Maa had worn: Kota Doria, Patola, Nairkunj patterned sari, Gadwal, Ikkat, Kalamkari, Kanjivaram, Pathaani and others. One amongst these crows flies to Bade's home when Maa travels, to keep him informed. When Bade is forlorn after Maa's disappearance in Pakistan, this crow makes a trip to Pakistan and witnesses Maa's reunion with Anwar. The crow also finds an ally in the national bird of Pakistan - the partridge. The partridge seemed restrained initially, but when he witnesses the love scene, his heart melts. As for the crow, Shree remarks, "...it was clear that the race of crows had no difficulty understanding any mother tongue, but mankind, throughout history, has created and destroyed its own tribe, so that it understands neither mother tongues nor father tongues nor anyone's tongues" (714).

The birds, specifically the crow, is a symbol of youth, and of maturity as he tells the partridge about humans and how they exist, "half here, half there, and their boundaries evaporate into the air when they see the same sky stretching out on both sides" (719). The crow appears, in this instance, to be wiser than its human counterparts, and functions as a critical commentary on the immaturity of human societies.

The butterflies that appear from the can and listen to Maa's story dwell on the idea of how good people survive in bad times. They seem to listen to the story, since, to listen, one doesn't need ears but a soul (596). The significance of how they spread the message of trust as they carry pollen from one flower to another is another example of border-crossing that is organic and holistic, breaking boundaries to stress universalism of experiences.

The simultaneous individuality and universalism of identities occur in the common names of relationships attributed to the characters. While they broadly represent the stereotypes in most families in India, the non-living are also characterised along these liminal spaces in the text: cane, door, windows, rainbow, Reebok shoes and others. Shree elaborates on the resilience of the bonds within the family, some of them broken yet surviving. She speaks of additional family members, "such as the door, the window, the crow that give life a special warmth" (729). Bade insists on maintaining the freedom of the doors and keeps them open at all times, while his son keeps teasing him and his wife fumes. Earlier in the text, the significance of the door is established as generations dwelt within it. As a threshold space, it is positioned between the inner and outer worlds and holds the key to letting people out and letting the world in. The walls take different forms, as well, with the passage of time. The writer creates ambiguity by putting forth the question, "Do the walls in Bade's home glide? Do they dance? (29)", treating them as living entities.

From the *grande récits* to the *petit récits*: Narrative Fragmentation and Plurality of Voices

Jean-François Lyotard's concept of *petit récits* (small narratives), as articulated in *The Postmodern Condition: A Report on Knowledge* (1979), offers a compelling lens through which to analyze Geetanjali Shree's *Tomb of Sand* (*Ret Samadhi*). Lyotard critiques *grand narratives* of the universalizing discourses of progress, nationalism, and rationality and argues instead for localized, subjective, and fragmented stories that resist totalizing explanations (Lyotard, 1984, p. xxiv). *Tomb of Sand* exemplifies this postmodern condition by foregrounding marginalized voices, disrupting linearity, and problematizing fixed identities.

Lyotard posits that postmodernist "incredulity toward metanarratives" (1984, p. xxiv) manifests in an emphasis on small, competing narratives rather than overarching historical truths. *Tomb of Sand* resists singularity, embracing a fluid

and non-linear storytelling mode. The novel frequently shifts perspectives, engaging in digressions, interwoven voices and wordplay that challenge any stable, authoritative voice. The narrative, for instance, refuses a fixed point of view, "Nothing happens in a straight line, stories least of all. Everything zigzags and meanders and doubles back" (Shree, 2022, p. 33). The story has different narrators including a door, perspectives of a mother, a daughter, son, daughter-in-law and crows. This rejection of a single perspective and linearity aligns with Lyotard's notion that knowledge is not a coherent totality but a network of competing discourses, each with its own legitimacy. This approach, in turn, reinforces the instability of identity, history, and truth.

The primary voice in the novel is an omniscient, self-aware narrator who frequently comments on the nature of storytelling itself. This voice is fluid, digressive, and metafictional, exemplified in the assertion: "Stories have their own stubborn ways. They go where they want to go, paying little heed to the teller's intentions" (Shree, 2021, p. 5). Such reflexivity subverts narrative linearity and paradoxically problematizes authorial control.

Maa, the elderly protagonist, functions as both a silent figure and a fragmented consciousness. Her perspective surfaces through memory and sensory details rather than direct speech, evident, for instance, in: "A girl who had left something behind. Or perhaps, something that had never left her" (Shree, 2021, p. 187). This narrative strategy blurs temporal boundaries, positioning the past as an active presence within the text. The perspectives of Ma's children, Bade and Beti, introduce further multiplicity of perspectives and narratives. Bade's pragmatic and patriarchal viewpoint is reflected in his frustration: "A mother should be calm, should stay put, should not disturb the delicate balance of things" (Shree, 2021, p. 243). In contrast, Beti's voice is reflective and literary, emphasizing Maa's latent agency: "Maa had always carried stories within her, layered like the saris she folded away" (Shree, 2021, p. 312). Their conflicting interpretations destabilize a singular reading of Ma's actions. Additionally,

inanimate objects, such as the door, assume a narrative voice: "A door is never just a door. It listens, it watches, it decides whether to let someone pass" (Shree, 2021, p. 29). This personification expands the narrative's scope beyond human consciousness, reinforcing its experimental form. Through these diverse narrative voices, *Tomb of Sand* foregrounds a polyphonic and fragmented storytelling mode, resisting dominant metanarratives and embracing plurality as a means of reconfiguring historical and personal identities.

Feminist *Petit Récits*: Women, Age, and Subversion

In contrast to grand narratives that privilege youth, masculinity, and nationalist histories, Geetanjali Shree's *Tomb of Sand* foregrounds an elderly female protagonist who subverts conventional expectations of aging and gender. Rather than conforming to the cultural script of elderly passivity, Maa's journey becomes an act of defiance against patriarchal structures. Her refusal to be confined by traditional roles is evident when the narrator asserts, "She was a mother, but she was also a woman, and a woman is never just one thing" (Shree, 2022, p. 126). This rejection of fixed identities aligns with Lyotard's formulation of *petit récits*, which challenges metanarratives and celebrates the legitimacy of localized, subjective experiences. As Lyotard argues, "Narratives that are not legitimized by a grand narrative are numerous, intertwining, and heterogeneous" (Lyotard, 1984, p. 60), a perspective that finds resonance in *Tomb of Sand* through its multiplicity of voices that disrupt hegemonic imaginations of identity, selves and socio-cultural structures.

Maa's journey across borders—both geographical and ideological—embodies the fluid subjectivities that Lyotard advocates. Her self-reinvention defies societal prescriptions of widowhood and old age, as seen in: "She had lived a life that was hers, but now she would live a life that was new" (Shree, 2022, p. 213). Furthermore, the inclusion of Rosie Bua, a transgender character, expands the novel's critique of rigid identity categories. Rosie Bua's existence challenges

dominant gender norms, reinforcing the novel's investment in *petit récits* that amplify marginalized voices: "She was neither here nor there, yet she was everywhere in between" (Shree, 2022, p. 289).

Through its fragmented structure, shifting perspectives, and subversive portrayal of gender and aging, *Tomb of Sand* enacts a feminist articulation of *petit récits*, resisting totalizing discourses and embracing the plurality of lived experiences.

Language, Playfulness, and Postmodern Resistance

Liotard emphasizes that language itself is unstable, a site of play rather than fixed meaning (1984, p. xxv). *Tomb of Sand* embraces this linguistic indeterminacy, using puns, digressions, and self-referential humor to dismantle the authority of any singular narrative. The text even draws attention to its own storytelling, "This is a story, but don't trust it too much. Stories are tricksters, and this one will slip through your fingers if you try to hold on too tightly" (Shree, 2022, p. 89). By foregrounding its own constructedness, the novel aligns with Lyotard's argument that "narratives do not narrate reality but create multiple, contestable realities" (1984, p. 81).

Geetanjali Shree's *Tomb of Sand* exemplifies Lyotard's *petit récits* by resisting *grand narratives* of Partition, national identity, and patriarchal norms. The novel's fragmented form, feminist resistance, and linguistic playfulness embody Lyotard's vision of postmodern knowledge as contingent, plural, and deeply subjective. In doing so, it affirms the power of small, personal stories to challenge and redefine dominant histories.

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Concluding Reflections

Geetanjali Shree's *Tomb of Sand* exemplifies a radical departure from conventional storytelling, embracing narrative fragmentation, multiplicity of voices, and linguistic play to challenge dominant metanarratives. By foregrounding an octogenarian as the female protagonist, the novel subverts traditional representations of gender, aging, and national history, privileging instead the *petit récits* perspectives of personal memory, identity, and trauma in constructing knowledge of the past. Through a deconstructive approach, the text resists singular meanings, engaging in constant deferral and reinterpretation of its own narrative structures.

The novel eschews linearity, favoring a fragmented, digressive style that foregrounds subjective experiences over historical absolutes. The oscillation between perspectives—ranging from Maa, Beti, and Bade to inanimate objects like the door—disrupts narrative authority, reinforcing the postmodern notion that knowledge and truth are constructed through multiple, often contradictory voices. From a deconstructive standpoint, *Tomb of Sand* destabilizes binaries such as self/other, past/present, and life/death, illustrating Derrida's concept of *différance*, wherein meaning remains in flux. The novel's linguistic innovations, including wordplay, metafictional intrusions, and intertextuality, resist closure, compelling readers to engage with the instability of language and meaning. Ultimately, *Tomb of Sand* enacts a literary rebellion against monolithic histories and rigid identity constructs. Through its polyphonic structure, feminist subversions, and deconstructive playfulness, the novel affirms the power of *petit récits* to reclaim silenced voices, challenge epistemic hierarchies, and redefine narrative possibilities in contemporary literature.

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