

Narratives Of Indian Women And Their Catastrophes: A Study Of Geetanjali Shree's Tomb Of Sand

Aparna Aggarwal¹, Dr.Gowher Ahmad Naik²

¹M.A. English

²Assistant Professor Lovely Professional University, Phagwara, Punjab

ABSTRACT

Geetanjali Shree has expressed the stories of Indian women and their nature, psychology, and struggle through her characters in the novel Tomb of Sand. She is a sensitive storyteller with a firm grasp on all the issues affecting women's lives, from the home-family to the community and particular region. These historical issues of Indian society which deeply affects the women have been brought up in Gitanjali Shri's fiction and seem relevant in every circumstance through the story of two women- Mother and Daughter. This paper analyses the what is to be a woman in a man's world and the catastrophes she has to go through her life just because she's a woman. It questions about the women's freedom of choice and what is to be a true feminist. It demonstrates how women have to face patriarchy in the name of family values and Indian customs. It also analyzes the issues of harassment, violence and exploitation of women during the partition of India in 1947.

Keywords: Women, Tomb of Sand, Mother-Daughter, Catastrophes, Patriarchy, Feminism.

Introduction

Narrative is an information presented in a series of events or experiences through a particular mode like fiction, non-fiction, abstract etc. The novel Tomb of Sand depicts the narratives of Indian women who have struggled for their freedom and liberty in the society which has been dominated by patriarchal society. It has discussed the mother-daughter relationship and through that showed the complications that women have to go through in their day-to-day life. It tells us the way Indian women have emerged from their traditional customs and have begun fighting for the rights in the society. Characters like 'Bade' (son) have differences with 'Beti' (daughter) on the basis of their ideology as she wants to outgrow the age old practiced patriarchal traditions and create her self-image. It also narrates us the experiences of women who were subjected to various kinds of violence during the partition of India through characters like Ma (Chanda or Chandra Prabha

Devi). She was abducted and had to leave her husband, her family, her whole life, back in Pakistan and has to come to India.

The author Geetanjali Shree depicts that how Indian women are neglected and ignored in their own homes and have been looked as other and secondary as she pointed out that men always receive the best dal, while women just have to eat leftover mush. Do they not? (Shree 12). The metaphorical point that the narrator is trying to make is that the women have suffered oppression and inequality in their own homes and their own society. While on the other hand men have always been entitled to do whatever they want and behave in way in a certain privileged manner and the society thinks it's the standard way. This suggests that gender is a social and cultural construct where women is not born secondary or passive but is made to by society as Simone De Beauvoir in the book *The Second Sex* says, "One is not born but rather becomes, a woman." (Beauvoir 283)

She also talks about how the home of Bade's door is always open and all sorts of guests are welcomed. Women of the house have to serve them no matter what time of the day it is and that too without any advance notice or knocking before entry as if they have no life of their own. She pointed as: The term "privacy" is not even in their vocabulary, and anyone who asserts such a privilege is viewed suspiciously. What exactly is she concealing? Seems suspicious. (Shree 31)

It shows that how it is always presumed that women do not have any life of their own and are always expected to have their lives involved around men that they have in their lives. So, they have to be always ready to feed and cater to the needs of the men. But privacy is the basic right of a human and with that comes the right to make a choice but women are deprived of it.

Narrator reflects society's thinking through the character of Bade that how it wants a girl to be bound in the four walls of house and not go outside of the house to make a career of her own and have an independent life without being defined in terms of her relationship with a man. Narrator shows that Bade doesn't approve of Beti's "bohemian lifestyle" and her late night work and her love life and wants to control her life as narrator points out by saying,

However, as she grew older, she needed instructions regarding what to do and what not to do. It goes without saying that an older brother must use the parental tone to express disapproval toward his sister. When his sisters' partners joined the conflict, complaints mounted and Bade became frustrated. (Shree 52)

Bade was not worried about her sister that how she's going to make it in her career alone but he was worried she shouldn't do anything that's against society's so called norms and do something which brings dishonour to the family and wants to cut ties with her, that's why, he cautions their mother

about it as it's pointed out as, "Bade cautioned Ma against talking to Beti too much on the phone and so on, and you are not to go there under any circumstances; we cannot legitimate her lifestyle" (Shree 63). This reflects that women still don't have freedom to make their own choices. Not only Beti but he tries to control his mother's actions too. But to break free from the social and cultural constructs of gender and to challenge oppression and live authentically, women have to make their own choices and choose their careers by themselves so that the further generations of men and women could live as equals as in Simone De Beauvoir's book – *Second Sex*, her central theme is "existence before essence," which states that we are born into the world (we exist), and that via our decisions, we then form our being (our essence). When we are denied the right to choose, that is oppression; when we choose to forgo our freedom, that is what Beauvoir referred to as a "moral mistake".

But Indian women are always expected to manage everyone's schedules and take care of everyone's needs without thinking about themselves which reflects the invisibility of women and their existence that how they are always someone's daughter, someone's wife, someone's mother and never their own person who had to take care of everyone's feelings. But Ma unlike the character of Bade who was against the character of Beti (who was courageous enough to choose an independent and modern lifestyle for herself), Ma gave her some privacy in a way to her Beti by opening the window to her freedom as she pointed as:

Ma succeeds in creating a route to the forbidden. comparable to the window that opens out towards the guava orchard. Ma had made this secret passageway clear for Beti's entrance and exit. There was a resounding "No, never, ever, she won't go out!" inside. And in the intervening period, Beti flew like a bird out the open window. (Shree 35)

And in some way wanted the privacy of her own too amidst the family duties as she was tired of living her life for pointed in this:

She had grown weary of giving them her breath, experiencing their emotions, carrying their desires, and carrying their resentments. She longed to glide into the wall with the tremor because she was sick of everyone. "Would the crevice itself start breathing if a bug slipped into it?" she wondered. (Shree 39)

Very sarcastically Geetanjali Shree tells that how generally Indian men scream and speak to women indirectly when she shows the interactions between Bade and Beti pointed as, when he sees her, he shouts loudly. Oldest sons uphold the practise of shouting, which dates back thousands of years. (Shree 45) This reflects that how patriarchy and underlying oppression by men has deep historical roots and is going on from so many decades. The thing is the family is the first school in which kids learn about their place in the world. This is where kids develop their earliest concepts of what it is to be male or female if they have two parents who are of different genders. They learn so much about how to behave with opposite gender from parents. So, if father is sexist, obviously son is also going to be same and it's very hard to break that cycle. It's very difficult for a son to live in a misogynistic environment every day without giving in. It becomes their standard way of behaving. He's obviously going to conform to gender stereotypes that his parents like Bade did seeing his father. It was passed on to him by his father as it's pointed out,

Although Bade's true mood never reached a boiling point, it is believed that Bade's father roared from the heart. The father had yelled until he retired, at which point he passed the yelling to his son and had been rather quiet himself. (Shree 46)

Thus, women have always suffered from male chauvinism and marginalisation.

According to the review of *Tomb of Sand* in *The Guardian*, women's invisibility is a common theme in Shree's writing. In India, where men still dominate society and psychology despite modernization, it seems to be the natural state of women. We might regain visibility if certain conditions are met, such as having children, demonstrating our worth to men, or winning the Booker Prize. Shree excels at observing the private lives of women. What happens to women's spines when they live with males. The narrator talks about how Bahu's overseas son also feels that her mother is neglected and ignored by his father and is worried for her as narrator points out, Ma, you were offered up on the family altar. (Shree 70) Women, be it any ethnicity and culture, satisfy this requirement at some point in her life. That's why her son was worried for her as, she simply understood. He had been troubled by the household's macho chauvinism since he was a young boy. (Shree 81)

Thus, marriage as a social institution lacks equality, love, and respect. It forces discipline on feelings like love and devotion that shouldn't necessarily have any. More precisely, husbands frequently believe that taking care of wives who are entirely dependent on them fulfils their "obligation" to do so. As Bade says to his wife, I'm the one who contributes money daily for everything. (Shree 129)

However, because they are aware that their husbands must take care of them and exert control over them, wives are made to feel inferior. As Simone De Beauvoir in the book *The Second Sex* says, "the husband is often frozen by the idea that he is accomplishing a duty, and the wife is ashamed to feel delivered to someone who exercises a right over her." (Beauvoir 465)

The narrator reflects that how generally housewife is not respected for the immense efforts she does in providing his man and his family food on time and taking care of his house. It's also the full-time job which requires

a lot of time, patience and talent but the wife is made to feel inferior to his husband. As when narrator talks about how Bahu does so much for Ma and take care of her then also Bade and everyone else doubt her. Her care for mother is seen just as an act which can't be matched with the care of one's own blood. As it is pointed out; That is, using the current crisis as a pretext, insults are being hurled at the lady of the house in anxious whispers or wrath is being vicariously dumped on their own daughters-in-law. (Shree 190).

This depicts that how women do so much unpaid household labour to manage home and gives up her whole life in this only then also she is not respected as Simone De Beauvoir in *The Second Sex* talks about how domestic chores, with its endless spiral of cleaning, scrubbing, and repeating, is one of the few tasks that most closely resembles Sisyphus' suffering. The housewife exhausts herself keeping track of time since she does nothing but maintain the status quo. While she is eating, sleeping, and cleaning, the years no longer ascend to heaven but instead lie ahead, drab and uniform. Then also she is not respected as the bahu in the novel also feels this and says, Regardless of whether I speak, I am the villain; not only your father and aunt but even the housekeepers are after me!(Shree 191).

The male chauvinistic society doesn't understand that a man may bring home the bread but it is the woman who actually makes the food out of that bread. Being a homemaker is a full day and night job and above that people don't even respect her. As it is pointed out when narrator says Bahu use to take care of Ma but then also nobody gave her actual due for her and she felt so neglected over all these years. No one ever believes her. Never does anyone that she does so much like she makes sure everything is put up in Ma's room so it would be simple for her to use it, including a little music player, a flower, and a thermos of hot water. She even has a TV fitted and told her to just watch the news. Instead of Bade, she was

the one who came up with all the unique details. The toilet shower that was next to the toilet was originally built on the left side; She moved it to the right so that she could grab it with her right hand and operate it more conveniently. But the credit for everything goes to son only as it is pointed out by Bahu: "He always thinks big, and he thinks that what makes him biggest – Bade." (Shree 204). But the small things matter the most and Bahu takes care of all those little things which may seem insignificant and small but matters the big time hence, the one driving the main steer of the home is Bahu. The narrator reflects this when Bade and Bahu are fighting about how Bade does so much for the family and spend so much money on them but doesn't realise that Bahu is the one who handles home and use that money in an efficient manner and do every unscheduled expense by herself as she pointed out as, You males think that everything is your fault just because you spend money on some of the major ostentatious necessities. The responsibility for all unforeseen costs falls on me. (Shree 129)Again, here narrator wants to reflect that how Indian men undermines the value of house makers and make them feel passive and secondary.

Despite being the crucial and integral part of driving the main wheel of home, Bahu never felt at home in her own husband's home as she says, "My home has never been my own" (205).Her opinions didn't matter to anyone even the servants. As when Bade tells servants to make parathas and she tells them to make khichdi, Susheela (the servant)prefers making parathas over khichadi which was so disrespectful and humiliating for her as she is the one who always decides and handles all this. So, she was expecting them to listen to her as she says: Bahu's voice reverberated throughout the universe as she said: "Now even the servants are stubborn and don't respect me."(Shree 128)This all reflects how the patriarchy is so engrained in us that sometimes we don't realise that we are being sexist in our very day-to-day life. It's not the fault of Susheela, but it's the society and her upbringing that taught her this

that men are considered to be the head of household.

The narrator also describes how Ma should have lived with her married son, Bade and Bahu in accordance with long-standing Indian custom, but instead, she moved in with daughter- Beti to start again and dream new dreams. While the son has a family of his own, it is customary in an Indian home for the mother to reside with her son and not the daughter and her family. The mother of the son must stay with him. Shree opposes this notion and presents a brand-new way of living life.

Thus, Bade and Bahu are not able to fathom the fact that why Ma is leaving even after they took all her responsibility and did all her work without complaint and are convinced that Beti can never take care of her with her “bizarro lifestyle” and questions Ma, When will you be back, should we send your bathing seat, do you have anything to eat, and should we send some parathas over? (Shree 280). This reflects that there is still a perception that only sons will be the support system in Parents old age and they don't expect a daughter to provide them in anyway – be it financially or emotionally or socially. But Ma presents a new way to live a life and she chooses her daughter over son.

Here she has freedom – to wear whatever she wants, to eat whatever she wants, to go wherever she wants and to have friendships with whosoever she wants as when comes to Beti's house, narrator tells, “Perhaps Ma felt her breath might return here”(Shree 239).She brings to life the dialogues between the two ladies without bringing up any men; instead, they talk about Beti's feelings, the mother's thoughts, their childhoods, and life in general. Ma no longer feels the need to follow the established rules, even if that were ever the case. Her children, on the other hand, struggle more to adjust to their new positions—Bahu retires, and Beti finds herself taking care of Ma. As Shree repeatedly observes, "The custom

carries on, even when the logic has ended.” (Shree 136) a situation she explores in the novel in a number of ways.

In this narrator tries to figure out what it is to be woman and what is to be a feminist in a true sense by showing the confusion through the character of Beti as she is also trying to figure out as, “When did I become me, and am I me, or have I become Ma?” (Shree 465). Ma learns to live her life again but this time on her own terms, leaving her confused. With her mother's increasingly free-spirited lifestyle and that of her friends, especially Rosie, Beti finds herself growing more and more conservative and upset. A shape-shifting, gender-fluid unwanted, s/he shows up uninvited, gives her radical thoughts on everything—from food to ecology to recycling to handicrafts—and takes action on them as pointed out by Rupert Loydell in *Boundaries and Borders*. Beti, who calls herself feminist and independent, particularly, comes to question the more or less lone identity she has assumed, both reassessing her relationship with KK and the uneasiness she's feeling seeing the relationship of her mother with Rosie. But soon after Rosie's death she realises that there is nothing wrong in the friendship with the transgender and she calls it as the “LGBT age.” (Shree 529)

Ma who, throughout her life, is constrained by borders, ultimately overcomes them. As a woman there are so many boundaries and borders which she has to face at every phase of her life due to the patriarchal society but Ma goes beyond the bounds of her life to find her sweetheart by crossing the borders and for a change thinks about herself and becomes selfish as, “At eighty, Ma had turned selfish.”(Shree 529) She is determined to find her ex-husband Anwar and so she decides to go to Khyber-Pakhtunkhwa where she resided as a young girl but has to leave as during partition of India in 1947, she was kidnapped but any how she fled from there and then came to India.

The narrator reflects how partition was a historical catastrophe which destroyed communities and families and the violence and harassment that women had to go through was horrific. Women were kidnapped, harassed and raped. So, many women committed suicide to protect themselves from the sexual harassment. According to Ayesha Jalal, in *The Pity of Partition* rightfully describes the Partition's apparent extraordinariness may vary in scope and severity, but it is ultimately proximate to the daily violence that women experience, which is supported by both the Indian society and the family, both patriarchal institutions.

As narrator talks about how Ma lost her home, life, dignity and self during that time. She was dragged from her home by a man wrapped in niqab, her hair caught into something pointy and pulled from her scalp. She was dragged on and on and thrown into a truck where girls like her were there one on top of another like a sheep goat. A tarp was thrown over and they were buried beneath and taken into a graveyard. (Shree 598) This reflects how the girls were harassed and brutally tortured during this time. They wished to die rather than facing all this trauma. The tension over female sexuality and ownership during the partition was heightened, which resulted in horrendous brutality against the women of both civilizations. The sexual violence that took place during the period of India and Pakistan's partition served as an extreme example of how society views women's sexuality, specifically the need to own and control her. The violence also demonstrated how, in the arrangement of gender relations in both the Hindu and Islamic societies of India, women's sexuality symbolically symbolised authority as pointed out by Deepa Narasimhan-Madhavan in *Gender, Sexuality and Violence: Permissible Violence Against Women During the Partition of India and Pakistan*.

Narrator tells how Ma and other girls were tortured for so many days and shifted from one truck to another with barely any food. They

were asked, "Do you want to save your life or your honour?" (Shree 604) For days girls were sexually harassed, raped and barbarically tortured. But Ma fortunately was saved eventually and was found in cantonment. She found out that border has been created and she's on the side of India. Her life, her family, her dignity all was left behind.

Thus, through this narrator wants to talk about partition through the female perspective and talk about the women's experiences of violence, dislocation and displacement. She has skilfully described the agonising exodus that followed the declaration of partition, the division of lifelong friends and families, the unwillingness of individuals to leave their homes, and the struggles the displaced refugees encountered on their journey to India. It's an effort to demonstrate how women were reduced to nothing more than bodies, bearing the responsibility of upholding the honour of their community. She attempted to highlight the social, physical, emotional, psychological, and cultural impacts of the catastrophe of the partition on the lives of women through Ma as pointed out by Dr. Pragti Sobti, Dinesh Kumar in *Partition As Memory: Construing Women*.

As U. Niaz rightly said in the article *Violence against women in South Asian countries* the Indian traditions has formed women's personalities and dictated their social status. The widespread occurrence of violence against women is a result of rigid societies and patriarchal views that devalue the role of women. Violence is permitted in families because of the man's absolute dominance over the home and the perception that family affairs are private. Women face all kinds of abuse like wife-battery and sexual assault and kidnapping for prostitution.

Conclusion

This paper establishes Geetanjali Shree's perspective on the situation of women in

society. It analyses how women are made and seen inferior to men and considered as the other. This is because society has built so many boundaries around women and they have so many rules like what to do, where to go, when to come back home, at what time, who to love, what career path is okay for a 'woman' and so on. Thus, woman is not born like this but she's made into this inferior sex by all these societal oppressions. In a way, Shree also wants to shift the narratives of partition, dominated by male writers' perspective, tell the tale through the perspective of a woman. This tells that during partition how women have to face the all kinds of violence and harassment. They were treated more badly than the animals. And now in contemporary times also, nothing much has changed. Women are still subjected to oppression and marginalization. Different vocabulary is used for men and women. After all this modern advancement, there is still gender based violence. But there are some courageous women who after all the gender-based biases and violence, still fight against this patriarchy like Beti who makes her own choices and follow her own choice of career path and has a separate love life too and Ma who in the end crosses every boundary, even the boundary of India Pakistan to meet the love of her life.

Works Cited

1. Beauvoir, Simone de. *The Second Sex*. Ed. Translated by H.M. Parshley. Harmondsworth, Penguin, 1986.
2. Jalal, Ayesha. "The pity of partition." *The Pity of Partition*. Princeton University Press, 2013.
3. Loydell, Rupert. "Boundaries and Borders." *International Times* (2022).
4. Narasimhan-Madhavan, Deepa. "Gender, sexuality and violence: Permissible violence against women during the partition of India and Pakistan." *Hawwa* 4.2-3 (2006): 396-416.
5. Niaz, Unaiza. "Violence against women in South Asian countries." *Archives of women's mental health* 6.3 (2003): 173-184.
6. Shree, Geetanjali. *Tomb of Sand*. Penguin random house indiapt. Ltd, 2022.
7. Sobti, Pragti, and Dinesh Kumar. "Partition As Memory: Construing Women Narratives." *Journal of Positive School Psychology* 6.9 (2022): 731-738.
8. "Tomb of Sand by Geetanjali Shree Review – the Timeless Search to Be Seen." *The Guardian*, 26 June 2022, www.theguardian.com/books/2022/jun/26/tomb-of-sand-by-geetanjali-shree-review-the-timeless-search-to-be-seen.