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Geetanjali Shree's Tomb of Sand: A Feminist Critique

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ABSTRACT:

Tomb of Sand (*Ret Samadhi*), 2022 International Bookers Prize winner novel, written in Hindi by Geetanjali Shree and translated by Daisy Rockwell portrays the condition of women in a male-dominated patriarchal society. The present paper makes an attempt to investigate various feminist perspectives, i.e., gender exploitation, discrimination, subjugation, and suppression in the aforesaid novel. Through the saga of a family from Northern India, it also portrays the challenges faced by the women who try to break these traditions.

KEY WORDS: Feminism, Gender, Tradition, Subjugation, Oppression

In a traditional society, where women form an “out-group”, it is claimed that the true woman is the one who is passive and chaste, and whose whole life is relegated to home and children. Feminists and Marxists have argued that the oppression of women is centrally constructed within the family, ideologically and materially. Margery Spring Rice puts prominence on the mammoth burden placed on women because of their role played as ‘housewife’:

“... in the large majority of homes, the woman is ... the slave without whose labour the whole structure of the family tends to collapse.” (Rice, 14)

Whether the context is colonial, post-colonial or any other, a woman is destined to the same kind of the oppression and subjugation. According to Simone De Beauvoir:

“One is not born but rather becomes, a woman” (Beauvoir 283)

Luce Irigaray in “Speculum of the Other Woman” also believes that “woman, the cave/womb becomes the place from which the male subject differentiates himself; she is the ground and precondition of his transcendence into the light, but is not acknowledged as such. Rather than proper recognition being given and the debt being paid to the womb from which he emerges, the mother takes on the character of the mere bodily other, outside representation, which is left behind in man’s progress towards reason, God or the light.” (Green, 21) She herself begins to desire what society wants her to and develops a value pattern that keeps her in a subjugate status. Kate Millet claims that a change in systematized masculine ascendancy cannot occur until the balance of power shifts to equality between the sexes:

“Unless the ideology of real or fantasized virility is abandoned, unless the clinging to make supremacy as a birthright is finally foregone, all systems of oppression will continue to function simply by virtue of their logical and emotional mandate in the primary human situation.” (Millet, 21)

Indian Writings are replete with the traditional archetypal images of women and Geetanjali Shree's novel Tomb of Sand presents a realistic picture of the sufferings and difficulties faced by an Indian woman through the character of an eighty years old protagonist Ma. The whole story is divided into three sections highlighting the three stages in the life of Ma. The first section of the novel entitled “Ma's back” concentrates on the life of Ma after the death of her husband whose presence she feels everywhere.

“His presence was still felt. even in death. But
regardless of whether or not he had died, it seemed
his widow certainly had” (15).

She goes into depression by isolating herself from the world and remained confined in her sorrow of separation. Nobody can persuade her to come out of this state until she herself decides to come out. Being a traditional Indian woman, she has spent her whole life taking care of her husband and children. She is totally disregarded and relegated to the secondary position in her home as it has been claimed that

“men always receive the best dal, while women
just have to eat left over mush. Do they not?” (12)

Her son, Bade, a civil servant on the brink of retirement, tries to rule over the house while her daughter Beti is not allowed a free life as per her own choice. As a true Indian male, Bade remains worried for his sister that she should not bring dishonour to the family by going against the norms of the

society. He tries to control his mother by cautioning her not to telephonically talk to her Beti so much. Even Bahu faces the same dilemma as she says, "My home has never been my own" (205) and she feels that she does not even get the due respect from the servants. At the end of this section, Ma decides to shift from her eldest son Bade's house to her Beti's house.

The second section of the novel entitled "Sunlight" begins when Ma after leaving Bade's house goes to her Beti's house where

"The sunlight arrived each morning, kissing Ma's
face...and the two of them would sit and gaze
affectionately at each other" (248).

A "fresh gust of wind" (310) is also brought by the regular visits of Rosie Bua, a transgender. Taking care of Ma, Beti assumes the role of a mother, and makes Ma her daughter. At the end of this section, Ma decides to travel to Pakistan. Once Beti was helped by Ma to lead an independent life now Beti is going to help her Ma to cross the border.

The third section of the novel entitled "Back to the front" begins when Ma along with Beti arrives at the Wagah border. Through the past life of Ma, the trauma of partition is also being highlighted. Ma remembers herself as Ali Anwar's Chanda who had suffered the pangs of separation from her loved ones. Here the issues of exploitation and violence faced by the women especially at the time of partition are presented marvellously. At the time of partition, the girls were raped and sexually harassed as they had only two options before them, i.e., to save their life or honour. The novel ends with Beti "leaping out of the window, filled with longing" (732).

Geetanjali Shree in *Tomb of Sand* explores vividly the alienation of the female protagonist and her search for identity. Tradition, transition, and Modernity are the phases through which the character of Ma seems to be passing. Shree in a very subtle way has analysed the devastations a woman has to go through in the name of Indian customs, rituals and family values in a male dominated Patriarchal society. She has also highlighted the effect of the catastrophe of partition on the lives of people especially women, who were merely reduced to the bodies to be played with. Ma remained a tomb of sand throughout her life but her will power to fly above the traditional ethos gives a new lease of life. At the end, she decides to move forward like a tree "gliding into her own arteries and aerosols" (56). Her journey to discover her own self opens doors for a new way which was hitherto unknown.

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