






Book Review: Tomb of Sand (Ret Samadhi)
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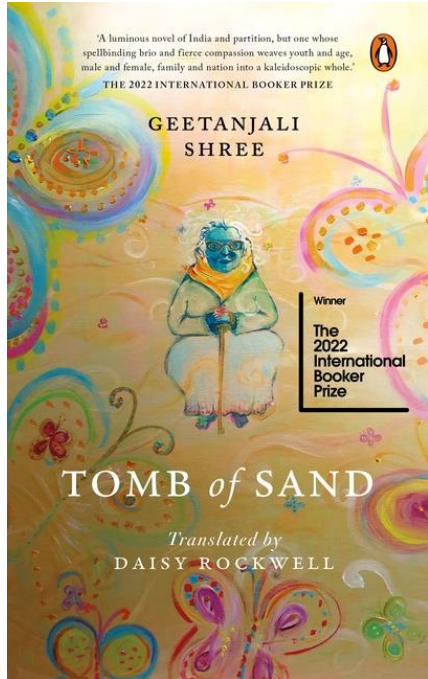
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Book Review

Book Review: Tomb of Sand (Ret Samadhi)

Geethanjali Shree, Trans. Daisy Rockwell, *Tomb of Sand*, Penguin India, 2022, p.738, INR 700. ISBN: 9780143448471



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International Booker prize winner for 2022, Geethanjali Shree's novel, *Ret Samadhi* translated as *Tomb of Sand* by Daisy Rockwell, is about borders – between genders, religions and nations. The story, set in Northern India, is about the eighty-year-old protagonist, Ma, who recovers from deep depression after her husband's death and much to the consternation of her children, expresses the desire to travel to Pakistan – to her roots and thus reclaims her identity as Chandraprabha Devi. Ma's travel is also a journey into her own self, opening doors and scaling walls, hitherto unknown.

The book is divided into three sections, indicating three phases of Ma's life – the first section is titled 'Ma's back,' and it focuses on her life after her husband's death and her daily routine before that. The readers are also subtly made aware of the patriarchal structures in place in this house. The extensive use of metaphors like walls, doors and borders clearly indicates the confined life of women. Ma has spent all her life taking care of the family that she now lays, "back to the world, as though dead" (Shree, 2022,p.39). This section concludes with Ma deciding to shift to Beti's

house for a while, moving away from Bade (eldest son), with whom she had been residing all along.

The second section titled 'Sunlight' begins with Ma entering Beti's house. The one sentence in the beginning, "this is the door that opens to reveal a world created by Beti alone" says it all. The darkness, doors and walls in Bade's house give way to light and colours. "The sunlight arrived each morning, kissing Ma's face...and the two of them would sit and gaze affectionately at each other" (Shree, 2022, p.248). The sounds of peace and the quiet chirping of birds prevail. Ma sips her morning tea 'as though drinking in a bird's song' (Shree, 2022, p.267). Ma and Beti enjoy each other's company and bond well. Rosie Bua, the transgender, brings in a 'fresh gust of wind', (Shree, 2022, p.310) with her regular visits. As the section concludes, Ma takes the strong decision to travel to Pakistan.

Section three titled 'Back to the front', commences with Ma and Beti reaching the Wagah border. The various partition narratives mentioned in this section, take the readers through the trauma of partition and Ma's past is slowly unveiled. Ma relives her childhood and the sorrow of separation from loved ones. She rediscovers herself as Ali Anwar's Chanda. The story concludes with Beti 'leaping out of the window, filled with longing' (Shree, 2022, p.732).

Tomb of Sand easily falls into the genre of partition literature and revolves around the life of Ma, who suddenly becomes conscious of her needs and desires and decides to live on her own terms. The novel begins by talking about borders... "this particular tale has a border and women who come and go as they please" (Shree, 2022, p.11). The first section of the book is replete with strong metaphors like walls, doors and windows, clearly indicating the borders between men and women. Ma, Bahu and Beti – the characters in the novel could be the mother, daughter-in-law and daughter of any Indian household, leading a mundane existence, confined within the walls and doors of a house, 'invisible even in moments of stillness' (Shree, 2022, p.37).

The novel traces the transformation of Ma, who was just a tomb of sand, toiling for the family till eighty, deciding to fly away like the wishing tree, 'gliding into her own arteries and aerosols' (Shree, 2022,p.56). In fact, travelling with Ma to Pakistan, and seeing her zeal, Beti wonders, "When did I become me, and am I me, or have I become Ma?" (Shree, 2022, p.465). Beti is in awe when she gets to see a Ma, who is totally different from the person that she used to be at home, where "everyone's breath flowed through her" (Shree, 2022,p.19). The journey to Pakistan is also a time for introspection for Beti when she actually gets to know Ma and the realization dawns on her as to how progressive her mother is.

Ma's bonding with the transgender Rosie, is viewed suspiciously by her own 'progressive' children, revealing middle-class hypocrisies. As the narration meanders through the traumatic events of partition to the present, the author also sarcastically touches upon all major socio-political issues in India, to date – religious intolerance, communal riots, episodes of lynching by the cow vigilantes, Buddhism, political manipulations, problems of minorities and strong engagement with environmental issues, arising out of massive urbanisation.

Shree has crafted a story richly woven with images, symbols and metaphors that speak volumes, unspoken. The form and structure of the novel are quite different. The story is narrated from multiple perspectives, with strokes of magical realism splashed here and there. Some chapters

are just a few sentences, while two pages of another chapter are just one sentence. The casual way of narration makes the story highly relatable to Indian readers. The story does not progress in a linear manner and is a beautiful compilation of scattered thoughts and some loud thinking. The chapters are strewn with images from nature – earth, birds, flowers and animals- that at times the reader just feels the sheer magic of poetry. The powerful animal imagery reminds one of Ted Hughes' poems. Through subtle sarcasm, Shree depicts the intensity of discrimination practised in Ma's house, as in "shouting is a tradition, an ancient Indian custom upheld by eldest sons" (Shree, 2022, p.45).

Ma's name is only revealed towards the end of the novel, when she reclaims her identity, as Anwar Ali's Chanda. Characters are described in detail so that one can almost feel their presence around. The youngest son's inability to laugh and the way Shree engages in this description indicates how strict adherence to customs and traditions could impact men too. In another chapter, she says, "the state of families is rather like that of the city of Delhi" (Shree, 2022,p.187) and goes into a detailed comparison of the two. The style of narration lures the readers to stay hooked to the book, unravelling the twists and turns, as the journey to Pakistan progresses.

Daisy Rockwell's translation needs special mention in this context. She has successfully captured the ethos of Ma's home, without compromising on its flavour. Be it the broken sentences frequently used, or the unstructured flow of words, Rockwell has captured the music and poetry of Shree's language. For a book that abounds with images and metaphors, layered with subtle sarcasm, the translation would have been a daunting task. However, Rockwell has aesthetically managed the recreation of the 'English dhvani' (Translator's note, 2022, p.735) of the original Hindi version.

Tomb of Sand is not a tragic story about partition, rather, it is an unforgettable tale of the triumph of humanity, inclusivity and plurality. This is what makes it different from other partition pieces of literature of our time. The novel, through the strong character of Ma demonstrates "anything worth doing transcends borders" (Shree, 2022, p.12).