

# REWRITING PARTITION: NARRATIVE TECHNIQUES AS COUNTER-HISTORY IN GEETANJALI SHREE'S *TOMB OF SAND*

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**Abstract :** Modern novelists in Indian writing in English study the important controversies regarding social, political and philosophical analyses of the matter and expose multiple perspectives directly or indirectly through the characters of their novels. Geetanjali Shree's *Tomb of Sand* (2022) is considered as the first novel translated from Hindi to receive the International Booker Prize 2022. It is based on the backdrop of the partition between India and Pakistan in 1947. This novel is divided into three parts. They are: Ma's back, Sunlight, & Back to the front. It revolves around the different attitudes of characterisation and identity in contemporary India. It projects some of the bitter truths that are happening in India today. The story revolves around the theme of feminism from different cultural perspectives. The protagonist of the story, Ma, an eighty-year-old woman, represents the lifestyle of conventional people in India. She became frustrated due to the loss of her husband. She felt lonely and drew boundaries between herself and society. Geetanjali Shree uses techniques that depict the coherence of the main characters in her novel. She articulates the connection between the past and the present through personal memory. Ma slowly recovered from the impact of loneliness; she found her identity and mingled with the company of humans. Rosie Bau, a transgender person, plays a crucial role in enhancing the life of Ma. The fragmented narrative technique reflects how memory is unstable and uncertain. It shows that history is not a fixed fact. It is changed according to personal experiences.

**KEYWORDS:** Counter-History, Narration, Memory, Magic Realism, Flashback

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Modern novelists in Indian writing in English study the important controversies regarding social, political and philosophical analyses of the matter and expose multiple perspectives directly or indirectly through the characters of their novels. Geetanjali Shree's *Tomb of Sand* (2022) is considered as the first novel translated from Hindi to receive the International Booker Prize 2022. It is based on the backdrop of the partition between India and Pakistan in 1947. This novel is divided into three parts. They are: Ma's back, Sunlight, & Back to the front. It revolves around the different attitudes of characterisation and identity in contemporary India. It projects some of the bitter truths that are happening in India today. The story revolves around the theme of feminism from different cultural perspectives.

The protagonist of the story, Ma, an eighty-year-old woman, represents the lifestyle of conventional people in India. She became frustrated due to the loss of her husband. She felt lonely and drew boundaries between herself and society. When her husband was alive, she had put herself into the welfare of the family. She was always alert and ready to do anything without any sense of tiredness. She lost herself after the death of her husband. Here, Shree depicts the ordinary lifestyle of an Indian woman. Ma started to face the wall the whole day, which made the whole family into fuss, "Ma just kept getting closer and closer to the wall, and her back became a wall itself..." (17). She lives with her son, Bade, a civil servant and her daughter-in-law, Bahu, in the government quarters. They are now in the position to move from the quarters due to the retirement of her son. Shree shows that her son follows the stereotypes and tries to rule over the family like his father. On the day of Bade's retirement party, everyone in the house tries to get her up, "Tell Ma the flowers are in bloom" (104). At the end of the part, Ma decides to shift herself from the walls of Bade's house to Beti's apartment. Ma has a daughter, Beti, who is considered to be a free bird in this novel. Shree describes Ma and Beti as, "one growing downwards, the other growing upwards." (12). Beti loves to enjoy the freedom and wants to break the chain of stereotypes that resulted in her being distinguished from her family members. She lives with KK, her lover, in an apartment. Geetanjali Shree employs foreshadowing, giving a clue as to what is to come at the end of the novel. Shree reveals the climactic outcome at the beginning, as Ma dies from a fatal gunshot, "A bullet came, punctured her body, shot through and out the other side." (13).

Geetanjali Shree explicates that Ma was talking to the crows, showing the unique way of an imaginative picture, abandoning her usual style of dressing and embracing self-realisation. She comically uses the motif to express the profound mind of nature. The murder of crows has its own committee, Jackanapes and a leader. They have their own crowlects. It understands the different languages of people while listening. They listen to the voice of Ma, who addresses them in a menacing tone. They are concerned about the welfare of society. They give reviews and critiques of human behaviour and thinking. On seeing Bade, who is sleeping, the crows are discussing and taking notes about his longing for his mother's company. He feels how her mother is changing in his sister's home. He recalls his childhood days and the gifts of sarees that he bought for Ma from famous spots. The crows feel pity for him. Some of the crows admire the colour and varieties of sarees which he bought for his Ma, "Before that Pochampally, after that will come Kanjivaram..." (384).

In Hindu mythology, the loud cawing of a crow is often believed to signal a warning or the presence of danger in a particular house or area. Shree suggests that some crows try to warn Bade to protect his Ma from a great fall. Although the crows wish to help prevent the tragedy, they quickly realise their own helplessness. At the end, Bade used to take care of the crows when Ma left him. Even crows flew to Pakistan, observing the activities of Ma. They seem to provide a running commentary on both sides of the situation, repeatedly attempting to alert him. In the end, they become silent witnesses to the unfolding events.

Geetanjali Shree employs magic realism to highlight the vitality in the novel's backdrop. Through fragmented Partition memories revisited from Ma's perspective, readers reconnect with its victims. In the Thar Desert, as Ma recalls her past, butterflies emerge from the cane handle, their colours shifting with the story's emotional essence—from black wings dotted with white to dark red with black stripes. Here, Shree explains that butterflies gather pollen from flowers, enabling them to sprout, blossom, and spread their fragrance. Similarly, they absorb the essence of the tale and let its beauty bloom across the sand.

Michel Foucault conceptualised counter-history as a genealogical and archaeological method that departs from conventional historical writing. It seeks to uncover the marginal and suppressed voices of the past, as reflected in his theoretical framework. Geetanjali Shree shows flashback as a powerful narrative device through which the protagonist reconstructs the history of Partition from her lived experience. The conventional history of the Partition of India in 1947 often focuses on political leaders, territorial divisions, and large-scale violence. It is framed in terms of agreements, borders, and statistics. However, Shree shifts the focus from state-centred history to intimate human experience. Through fragmented memories and reflective flashbacks, the protagonist revisits her past, bringing forward silenced voices, especially those of women, families, and ordinary individuals whose suffering is often excluded from official records. Ma and Beti decide to go to Pakistan in order to fulfil the wishes of Rosie Bau. There, Shree reveals the secrets of Ma in a deliberate manner.

In the past, an eighty-year-old Ma named Chandra Prabha married Ali Anwar, a Muslim man, at the age of sixteen in Pakistan before partition. The Partition violently disrupted their lives. Borders were drawn overnight, and people were forced to migrate based on religious identity. Chandra Prabha was separated from Ali Anwar, and like millions of others, she had to rebuild her life in India. "Someone's earring. A crushed skull. Tossed against the wall like a watermelon. Brains and a single eye, popped out like a spring." (598). She was forcefully sent to the border of India by "...that man with the lump. A brother." (616) to safeguard herself from the murderers. She got a Buddha statue, which symbolises hope to recover from the bitter situation. The pain of Partition 1947 also shows in the movie, *Bhaag Milkha Bhaag*. It is a true story based on the life of an Indian athlete Milkha Singh (The Flying Sikh). Milkha Singh ran for India during the 1960 Summer Olympics in Rome. In this movie, Milkha Singh (Farhan Akhtar) has a flashback to his childhood as a young boy, which haunts him and leads him to become an athlete.

In *Tomb of Sand*, Geetanjali Shree masterfully deploys flashback, foreshadowing, and magic realism not merely as stylistic flourishes, but as potent narrative techniques that rewrite Partition history from the margins. It rewrites 1947's trauma through non-linear techniques—flashbacks that disrupt chronology, foreshadowing cyclical violence, and magic realism that invokes spectral presences—to resist state-sanctioned histories and reveal the affective undercurrents of loss and resilience.

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