

A Posthumanist Reading of Vibrant Matter in Geetanjali Shree's *Tomb of Sand*

Gopal Roy
M.A. in English
The University of Burdwan

Abstract: This paper discusses the radical materialism of Geetanjali Shree's *Tomb of Sand (Ret Samadhi)*, suggesting that this text acts as a posthumanist critique of historiography of Partition. Through the lens of Jane Bennett's idea of "vibrant matter," this paper discusses the move from the anthropomorphic subject to a network of agency called "actants." These "actants" include everything in the novel: household items, animals, the very sands of the desert, and more. Analyzing the concept of "thing-power" and "Shi" of the desert, this paper argues that the end solution to the problem of trauma provided by Geetanjali Shree is "Zoe-centered."

Keywords: Vibrant Matter, Geetanjali Shree, Tomb of Sand, New Materialism, Partition Literature, Non-human Agency, Posthumanism, Thing-power, Assemblage, Shi.

Introduction

Partition literature has always been centered around the "bio-politics" of human suffering, emphasizing the catastrophic division of the nation-state and the personal subjectivity. However, Geetanjali Shree's *Tomb of Sand*—first published in Hindi in 2018 under the title *Ret Samadhi* and translated into English in 2021 by Daisy Rockwell—demands a conceptual framework change to that of posthumanism. The present study posits that the novel is more than the story of human healing but represents "thing-power"—the "curious ability of inanimate things to animate, to act, to produce effects dramatic and subtle" (Bennett 6). It is only when Shree's novel is contextualized within the tradition of Khushwant Singh, Salman Rushdie, and Saadat Hossain Manto that it becomes clear how Shree moves beyond the witness of the human "I" to explore an "ontological field without any unequivocal demarcations between human, animal, vegetable, or mineral" (Bennett 116).

Under the rubric of a lively materialist perspective, the protagonist, Ma, cannot be considered a sovereign agent, but a site of material-discursive intra-action. The literary precedents that her character resembles—the mother in Shree's *Mai* (1993), for example—point to the presence of the "domestic swarm." However, in *Tomb of Sand*, the "distributive agency" of matter functions as the narrative's primary mechanism. This agency "does not posit a subject as the root cause of an effect" (Bennett 31). Instead, it arises from the collective efficaciousness of canes, quilts, and the age-old walls. The proposed study recognizes the deficiency in existing research concerning the way Shree's narrative challenges "Inorganic Nationalism," the state's endeavor to freeze borders on a changing land through "interactive interference" by non-human actants (Bennett 21).

The humanist lineage of partition narrative perceives the non-human world solely as an extension of the human one. In *Train to Pakistan* (1956) by Khushwant Singh, the train represents a "passive vitality," a mere machine designed to transport human bodies. The same applies to Salman Rushdie's novel *Midnight's Children* (1981) which symbolically represents the fluid relations between the human body and the world around it. In *Midnight's Children*, "Saleem's cracks" can be seen as epistemological symbols rather than the earth's cracks indicating its life. Yet Shree goes beyond metaphor and enters the territory of monism. Building upon the story of *Toba Tek Singh* by Manto, which describes the "no-man's land" as absurd, Shree reimagines this space using Bennett's idea of "a swarm of vitalities." The author proposes that there is a sovereignty in these "bits of matter" (Bennett 61).

According to this paper, by loosening "the connections between efficacy and the moral subject" (Bennett 32), Shree puts forward a post-humanist ethic of entanglement in *Tomb of Sand*. For instance, in this novel, the border is not only a political problem but also a material impossibility because "vibrant matter" does not acknowledge the demarcation lines created by human beings. The paper concludes that the ultimate Samadhi cannot be understood from a human point of view, for it is the triumph of coming back to life in the form of "the affective, signaling nonhumans" (Bennett 117). In this respect, Shree shows that one needs to surrender into the dazzling and explosive power of a living world where everything has its voice.

The Manifestation of Thing-Power

The ontological framework presented by Geetanjali Shree in her novel *Tomb of Sand (Ret Samadhi)* is grounded on a conscious departure from the Cartesian dualism that had prevailed in Western philosophy for a long time. As Jane Bennett explains, Cartesian dualism rests on a "dull conception of matter"—the idea that non-human world functions merely as backdrop or stage-setting against which human actors enact their roles. In contrast, according to Shree's novel, the actions are performed through the notion of "thing-power," which, as Bennett says, is defined as "a shimmering, potentially violent vitality intrinsic to matter" (Bennett 61). Thing-power is the quality of nonliving things to become actants—entities capable of creating effects dramatic and subtle.

Thing power operates in the domestic space of the novel as an autonomous agency that disrupts the family's efforts to control Ma's body. As noted by Bennett, thing-power draws attention to the magical on the common. The first important actant in this respect is the quilt that Ma uses to hide herself in the novel, *Tomb of Sand*. It is much more than a piece of cloth as it is described

as “a swarm of vitalities” (Bennet 32), which facilitates Ma's withdrawal from the scene. The quilt is not only a fabric but a thing, which possesses its own “stubbornness” in a material form and interferes with “interactive interference”, facilitating Ma's silence. In this sense, the quilt is not a mere symbol of depression but an active agent of this process itself. This is evident through the manifestation of a “conatus,” which, in the context of Bennett's work, refers to the effort made by a thing to remain in existence.

In addition to it, in her novel, Geetanjali Shree undermines the anthropocentric hierarchy of the domestic space by endowing the materials used in the construction of the house with a unique autonomy. Such autonomy can be observed in describing the family home's interior: “It was just a simple brick-and-cement wall—a yellowing, whitewashed, middle-class wall, holding the ceiling, floor, window, and door together, with a network of pipes, wires, and cables arrayed within, enfolding the entire home in its wallfulness.” (*Tomb of Sand* 5)

Shree's use of the term “wallfulness” serves as a literary embodiment of Bennett's “thing-power.” Through such an act, the text implies that the wall is endowed with ontological reality that does not depend on the existence of humans and their interaction with it. Thus, the wall cannot be treated as a mere object; rather, it is a living thing characterized by conatus. And the door “sees all, hears all, understands the heads and tails of things with no head or tail at all... the door does not see with superficial narrowed vision; it recognises the unpresent.” (*Tomb of Sand* 14)

The highest manifestation of thing-power is expressed in the novel through the whirling cane. In the beginning, when Ma was completely inactive, the journey undertaken by Ma for the sake of discovering the truth makes Ma feel the cane as a guide rather than an object. As per Bennett, thing-power entails an efficacy that does not posit a subject as the root cause of an effect. The cane “whirls” and “strikes,” and thus, possesses the power of “a whirling dervish,” characterized by a “clinamen,” which is the swerve of atoms. The motion of the cane is not determined by any conscious will of Ma but, on the contrary, it is a material “propensity” that “signals” the direction of action. The current situation demolishes the anthropocentric vision of the “prosthetic”, when it is not the cane that becomes the extension of humans, but it is the humans who turn into prosthetics of the course of the movement of the cane. “Human intentionality can be agentic only if accompanied by a vast entourage of nonhumans,” Bennett explains (108). It means that the achievement of the border by Ma is achieved through her cooperation with the thing-power of the cane.

In addition to the above mentioned actants, the writing of Shree conducts a “materialist reckoning” that is concerned with the debris that left behind in the house. Tea leaves, dust, cooled ashes, and thrown away saris are seen as things that have a vibratory frequency. According to Bennett, there is a need to acknowledge the “active power of foodstuffs” (43) and “vitality of the materialities” (34). In *Tomb of Sand*, household objects are said to clog and divert the story of humans.

The Assemblage of Being

In the context of vibrant materialism, the idea of assemblage becomes an important organizational category through which it is possible to understand the idea of agency not as a quality of humans but as a result of the power distribution. Thus, in her book *Vibrant Matter*, Jane Bennett explains that “assemblages are ad hoc groupings of diverse elements, of vibrant materials of all sorts” that have collective affective capacities beyond those of their constituent parts(23). Within Geetanjali Shree's novel *Tomb of Sand*, the progression of events should not be considered as a product of the monolithic sovereignty of the character called Ma. Instead, agency arises within the human–nonhuman assemblages that constitute Ma's world. The first example of such an assemblage where agency arises is “the domestic assemblage.” Rather than referring to Ma's catatonic depression through the framework of her psychological condition, it is possible to consider a cluster of different materials – “a swarm of vitalities” (32), made up of heavy quilts, cooling tea, the solidness of the ground, and Ma's declining vitality. These elements form a system that controls the tempo of domestic life; hence, confirming the claim by Bennett that agency is always “distributive,” emanating from an alliance of actants.

According to Bennet, agency is distributive of the whole set and agency is not the property of any single body. The case of Shree reveals that what makes it possible for Ma to travel freely through the border is not the understanding gained by the psyche, but the “swarm of vitalities” (32), including her daughter Beti, the revolving cane, the shifting winds of the desert, and the passport bureaucracy. This is a perfect illustration of Bennet's concept that the intentions of humans can be agents in life only if surrounded by a huge retinue of non-humans.

Decentralization of the human body in the context of *Tomb of Sand* can be analyzed from the viewpoint of Actor Network Theory developed by Bruno Latour. According to his theory, “anything that does modify a state of affairs by making a difference is an actor” (*Reassembling the Social* 71). In this novel, objects do not just help perform actions but have given the right to perform certain actions. The use of a cane is an example of such an object that acts as a “mediator” in Latour's terms, whereby the input of the movement by Ma produces a completely different output of “whirling” resistance. It was observed by Geoffrey Galt Harpham that a conventional notion of individuality as a unified center of agency becomes replaced by “a field of forces” in the context of posthumanist landscapes (*Getting it Right* 42).

Furthermore, the concept of “agential realism,” as forwarded by Karen Barad, becomes a useful critical framework to understand the dynamics of this collaborative agency, entangled with other entities. According to Karen Barad, “agency is a matter of intra-acting; it is an enactment, not something that someone or something has” (*Meeting the Universe Halfway* 178). In the novel, one can see a good example where the “agency” involved in crossing the Indo-Pak border is not defined by the permit that Ma possesses but rather becomes an enactment through the intra-action of her body, sand, and crow-talk. As Rosi Braidotti explains, this is a new paradigmatic shift that needs to focus on a “Zoe-centered” approach.

Ethical implication of distributive agency from *Tomb of Sand* entails a paradigm shift in terms of who should carry the burden of blame or guilt. If agency is a collective affair, then the guilt of history becomes shared and thus embedded in the materiality

of the entity. As per Bennett, acknowledging the theory of distributive agency allows us to move beyond the “narcissism” of human self-blame and create a more sustainable ethics both ecologically and politically. Regarding the partition of India, Shree posits that the violence related to the bordering process was not only human but also material in nature. By highlighting the indifference of the sand and wind towards the existence of borders, she suggests that the creation of “confederate efficacy” could be possible in order to heal the trauma and pain caused by 1947 partition. To live in Shree's world means to be part of a vast “signaling nonhumans” wherein each movement is always done through cooperation between the biological body and signaling matter.

The *Shi* of the Border

In the last act of *Tomb of Sand*, the focus moves from the interior setting to the harsh reality of the Indo-Pak border, which requires a move from “things” to the investigation of *Shi*. The term “*Shi*” is an invention of Jane Bennett, borrowed from the Chinese philosophy of military and aesthetics, and describes the “style, energy, propensity, trajectory,” or executive power inherent to a particular configuration of things (Vibrant Matter 35). For Bennett, *Shi* is the “disposition” or “mood” of the assembly of things that endows it with agency independent of human will. On Shree’s side of the borderlands, the Radcliffe line becomes a fragile manifestation of “Inorganic Nationalism,” or the efforts made by the state mechanism to transform the earth into a “dead” surface. However, *Shi* of the land is such a configuration that possesses a “propensity” for movement and cannot be restricted by the “static logic” of the tomb or the fence.

This particular material force becomes more apparent through the series of episodes like the “crow meeting”. These can be seen as a critique of the national language from a posthuman perspective. In the novel, crows can be seen as a companion species, beings that become-with other living beings in common actions and existence. Crow, for Shree, is not a harbinger of death; rather, crow is an actor in a heterogeneous public. As stated by Bennett, a public is a collective that emerges in response to a specific problem. Here, the problem is Partition, a man-made creation that is not recognized by nature. “Crow meeting” episode may be considered as an example of affective signaling that occurs outside the boundaries of human nationalism. In giving the crow a voice within the narrative, Shree shows how ineffective borders are as agents of containment. Crows, having *Shi*, are able to cross boundaries without any difficulty whatsoever. Their migratory patterns allow for a distributive agency that makes fun of human soldiers with their clear-cut lines.

However, the sand of the desert borderland also has its own *Shi* through its fluidity which makes it impossible to “partition.” Traveling across the border space, the sand is able to carry within itself the remains of history shared by all—these “bits of matter” (61), whose erasure is attempted by human history. Such a concept of Material Memory contrasts sharply with the Inorganic Nationalism typical of the human world, where the illusion of the passivity of the land governs the formation of the nation-state. By considering sand an active character in the narrative, Shree changes the “unit of analysis” from the political subject to material actant.

Nevertheless, in *Tomb of Sand*, eventually, these borderlands come to constitute an “ontologically heterogeneous public” (Bennett 108) through the intra-action of the humans, the crows, dust, and the wind. The fact that the landscape “waited” while the humans recovered from their traumas is only one part of the story. What needs to be considered is that the *Shi* of the landscape, its tendency to turn into something else, has been responsible for bringing about harmony. This is so because the problem of the borderlands does not get solved in any political or diplomatic way, but through a material approach, where the “vibrant matter” of the earth is responsible for solving this dilemma.

The Samadhi of Matter

In conclusion of *Tomb of Sand* by Geetanjali Shree, where the term “sand” already indicates both the concept of memory as well as change, the climax of events takes place when Ma enters her final phase of “Samadhi.” Samadhi in Sanskrit means the process of deep concentration or meditation, which unifies human being with divinity; however, in the case of Vibrant Materialism, Samadhi implies reunion between all beings on the ontological level. This moment can be paralleled with what Rosi Braidotti refers to as the “Zoe”—that is, “vital life force” flowing through all things living as well as inanimate (The Posthuman 60). It has been mentioned by Braidotti that Zoe signifies the presence of a monistic universe where “human is not radically different from the non-human.” The last phase in the novel marks the victory of Zoe-centered ethic over Thanatos (“death logic”), which makes the “human” distinct from the rest because it has a fixed border of a state and a grave.

In her last moments, Ma decides to step out of her position as a “sovereign subject” and become one of the members of this entourage. By fusing herself with the desert in her physicality, Ma creates a space that functions as a site of material-discursive entanglement where the “bits of matter”—the bone, the breath, the story—of her own body are intertwined with the thing-power of the sand. It is a perfect example of the “intra-action” when the demarcation line between the biological and geological fades into oblivion. The sand, which has been functioning as a “swarm of vitalities” all along in the narrative, emerges as the ultimate place of refuge for her memories, suggesting that the trauma of Partition can never be healed through documentation, but only through the silence of the landscape.

Moreover, the significance of this part lies in the fact that the ultimate Samadhi turns into a representation of moving from “Human Memory” to “Material Memory.” As the nation-state strives to assert its dominance in building “Inorganic Nationalism” through monuments and drawing borders on the map, Shree suggests that the only true history resides within the “vibratory frequency” of Mother Earth. When Ma blends in with the sand of the desert, she moves beyond “unequivocal demarcations” (116) that led to the violence of 1947. She joins the heterogeneous group of birds, sands, winds, and primordial dust. In this heterogeneity and signaling swarm, Ma’s energy is dispersed rather than depleted. It may be argued that the story ends with the idea that the only way to “heal” oneself from the atrocities of Partition was to give up trying to own history as a human creation and become “possessed” by the signaling material of the earth.

Conclusion

This is because the winning impact of the International Booker Prize awarded to *Tomb of Sand* has everything to do with its role in providing a Posthumanist Ethics to the postcolonial world. The novel makes it clear that the only means to counter the “death logic” of boundaries lies in recognizing the “vitality” of the non-human. Thus, the final Samadhi can be seen as an ethical proposition that recognizes our inability to dominate the Earth and makes us realize that we too are “actants” in it. The fact that Ma leaves the world does not mean she has left it; rather, it means she has completely immersed herself in it as she becomes part of the shimmering, potentially explosive energy of the universe. As Bennett describes it, the “Tomb” of the title is no tomb at all but a place of infinite material becoming.

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