

From Conflict to Reconciliation: Geetanjali Shree's Vision of Inclusive Communities in an Age of AI and Geopolitical Uncertainty

Supervisor - Prof. Dr. Sujata, R.Scholar - Poonam Singh,
Dept. English, SMeH, MRIIRS, Faridabad

Abstract :

The twenty-first century presents a strange paradox: as technological infrastructure binds the globe together, social fabrics are pulling apart. Algorithmic systems optimize decision-making and automate communication, yet they routinely flatten human nuance, deepen ideological divides, and struggle with ethical ambiguity. Against this mechanical backdrop, contemporary literature remains a critical space for understanding human friction and the fragile work of social repair. This paper explores the fiction of Geetanjali Shree—focusing on *Tomb of Sand*, *Mai: A Novel*, *Our City That Year*, and *Gone Missing*—to examine how her narratives treat conflict not as a political anomaly to be suppressed, but as an inescapable reality of human life. Shree's work suggests that true reconciliation demands more than institutional peace or superficial unity; it requires an active, often uncomfortable engagement with memory, vulnerability, and domestic power structures. In an era increasingly governed by automated logic and geopolitical volatility, Shree's fiction offers an urgent reminder: inclusive communities are built not through total consensus or technical efficiency, but through the patient, messy practice of empathetic attention.

Keywords: *Geopolitical uncertainty, Conflict, Reconciliation, Memory, Empathy, Inclusive communities, Leadership, Literature.*

Introduction

Conflict is rarely an abrupt breakdown of human order; more often, it is the quiet condition under which we live. It simmers in family dining rooms, structures everyday language, and defines the borders drawn between communities and nation-states. Yet human history is equally marked by a counter-urge toward repair—a quiet, persistent attempt to stitch broken ties back together without ignoring the tear. In South Asian literature, where the historical shadows of Partition, patriarchal dominance, and communal violence remain long, writing about conflict is seldom just an aesthetic choice. It is a way of asking how people manage to live alongside one another after trust has collapsed.

Geetanjali Shree occupies a singular place in this literary tradition. Rather than treating conflict as a dramatic showdown between obvious villains and heroic victims, her novels pull the lens back to observe how historical trauma settles into the ordinary rhythm of daily life. Her characters move through spaces shaped by silence, inherited grief, and systemic exclusion. Yet, in Shree's hands, these marginal experiences do not result in total despair. Instead, they become subtle turning points where characters begin to confront who they are and how they relate to others.

This literary perspective is particularly vital today. Modern public life is increasingly mediated by automated platforms designed to maximize friction for engagement, reducing complex social identities into binary arguments. While Artificial Intelligence can calculate, predict, and synthesize data with incredible speed, it cannot sit with grief, navigate moral ambiguity, or offer genuine forgiveness. Re-reading Shree in this technical climate reveals something crucial: the capacities required to build resilient, inclusive communities—patience, emotional presence, and a willingness to sit with hard histories—are precisely the human qualities that algorithms cannot replicate.

Conflict as an Inner and Social Reality

In Shree's fiction, the division between personal psychology and political reality is constantly blurring. The quiet anxieties of an individual almost always echo the broader social tensions surrounding them.

This interplay is most vivid in *Tomb of Sand (Ret Samadhi)*. Here, conflict begins not on a battleground, but in a bedroom where an eighty-year-old widow, Ma, turns her back to the world and refuses to get out of bed. On the surface, her silence looks like the depression of old age. In reality, it is a quiet revolt against the rigid roles assigned to an elderly woman within a traditional family structure. When Ma eventually rises and insists on traveling back to Pakistan, her journey breaks through multiple boundaries at once: the social expectations of age, the domestic boundaries of the family, and the heavily guarded border between two nations.

Shree does not revisit Partition as a closed historical event recorded in textbooks. Instead, through a fluid narrative style filled with wordplay and shifting perspectives, she reveals how Partition lives on inside people—as unhealed grief, lost friendships, and lingering suspicion. The physical border Ma crosses is secondary to the emotional borders her family has spent decades building to keep painful memories at bay.

A similar dynamic plays out in *Mai: A Novel*, though within the quieter walls of a domestic home. The conflict here is built into the everyday silence of Mai, a mother whose complete self-erasure is taken for granted by her family. Through the eyes of her daughter, Sunaina, the reader watches a young generation try to make sense of this quiet oppression. Yet Shree resists turning the narrative into a simple tale of modern rebellion versus traditional subjection. Sunaina comes to realize that judging her mother's compliance is just another way of silencing her. True reconciliation within the family requires something harder than anger: it demands recognizing that Mai's passivity was her way of surviving a system that offered her no other options. As Sunaina observes, understanding her mother's life means giving up the comfortable illusion that freedom is easy.

In both novels, conflict is not a problem to be solved overnight. It is an evolving process that forces individuals to look inward before they can change how they treat the people around them.

Society, Violence, and the Ethics of Coexistence

Moving from the home to the street, *Our City That Year (Hamara Shahar Us Bar)* takes on the volatile terrain of communal politics and urban violence. Writing against the backdrop of rising sectarian tension in India during the 1990s, Shree paints a picture of a city slowly losing its balance to suspicion and ideological fever.

What makes the novel striking is its refusal to take the easy moral high ground. Shree turns her critical lens not just on political extremists, but on well-meaning secular intellectuals who watch the city fall apart from the safety of their studies. Characters like Hanumant and Sharad believe their progressive ideals make them immune to prejudice, yet as the crisis deepens, their own hidden biases and paralysis come to light. Shree shows that when a society fractures, no one remains entirely untouched or neutral.

The city itself becomes a living character—a place defined by historical diversity, yet fragile enough to be torn apart when fear is weaponized. Violence in this narrative is rarely limited to physical riots; it is present much earlier in the subtle changes of tone, the sudden silences between old neighbors, and the gradual retreat into separate identity groups.

Against this creeping isolation, Shree's work suggests a quiet ethics of coexistence. Peace cannot be manufactured through state declarations or forced political harmony. It requires people to stay in conversation, especially when that conversation becomes difficult. True dialogue means giving up the satisfaction of total moral certainty and acknowledging that those on the other side of an ideological divide carry their own fears and histories. In a world where political discourse is increasingly driven by outrage and tribalism, this commitment to staying at the table is a profoundly radical act.

Memory, Loss, and the Work of Repair

Across all her writing, Shree treats memory as something active and morally demanding. It is not nostalgia or a passive recollection of the past; it is the raw material out of which identity and future relationships are forged.

In *Gone Missing* (Tirohit), absence takes center stage. The story revolves around disappearance—not just of people, but of desires, histories, and voices that society finds inconvenient to acknowledge. By focusing on what has been erased, Shree highlights how modern communities often maintain a superficial peace by pushing non-conforming individuals and painful truths to the margins.

The central insight of Shree's work on memory is that healing cannot happen through collective amnesia. Societies often try to move past historical trauma by telling victims to forget and move on, prioritizing a quiet present over a difficult past. But Shree's narratives insist that ignored wounds do not disappear; they simply fester beneath the surface. Reconciliation requires the courage to look directly at what was lost, name the injustice, and sit with the discomfort of remembrance.

In *Tomb of Sand*, Ma's refusal to forget her pre-Partition life disrupts the tidy, modern lives of her children, but it also frees her. By returning to the place of her original trauma, she reclaims a part of herself that had been frozen in time. Her journey demonstrates that memory, when faced directly, can break down artificial barriers and restore a sense of shared humanity across the deepest political divides.

Literature in an Automated Culture

The broader significance of Shree's vision becomes clear when set against today's technological landscape. We live in a world increasingly shaped by machine learning models, automated decision-making, and algorithmic feed curation. These systems are optimized for speed, pattern recognition, and efficiency. They thrive on clear categories and predictable inputs.

Human relationships, however, are rarely neat or predictable. They are messy, ambiguous, and rooted in specific histories that cannot be reduced to data points. This is where literature—and Shree's prose in particular—serves as an essential counterweight

Where digital platforms encourage quick judgments and sort users into outrage-driven echo chambers, Shree's writing demands slow reading. Her recursive sentences, sudden shifts in perspective, and fondness for wordplay force the reader to pause, re-read, and accept that a single story always contains multiple truths.

While an AI can simulate conversational language, it cannot experience the weight of inherited grief, the quiet guilt of a family dynamic, or the moral effort required to forgive an old enemy. By inviting us to step into lives radically different from our own, literature

exercises the exact emotional muscles that automated systems threaten to atrophy: deep empathy, self-scrutiny, and a tolerance for human complexity.

Two Ways of Seeing

Algorithmic Systems

- Requires neat, binary inputs
- Optimizes for speed & engagement
- Sorts people into echo chambers
- Flattens emotional complexity

Literary Imagination

- Embraces ambiguity & paradox
- Demands patience & slow reflection
- Forces engagement with the 'Other'
- Preserves grief, memory & nuance

Reimagining Leadership and Civic Life

Beyond literary critique, Shree's novels offer a fresh way to think about leadership and community building. In a culture that often equates strength with dominance, certainty, and top-down control, her characters offer a very different model of authority.

Transformation in Shree's world almost never comes from powerful figures laying down the law. It comes from unexpected sources: an elderly mother who stops obeying domestic rules, a daughter who learns to stop projecting her own expectations onto her mother, or neighbors who insist on talking to each other while a city falls apart. These figures exercise a kind of quiet leadership rooted in listening, patience, and the courage to admit when they are wrong.

This perspective is crucial for modern civic life. Whether in local neighborhoods, educational institutions, or international organizations, building inclusive communities requires leaders who can navigate deep cultural differences without resorting to coercion or rhetoric. Shree's work suggests that ethical leadership begins with an internal reckoning: those who have faced their own biases and internal contradictions are far better equipped to bridge social divides with genuine compassion.

Conclusion

Geetanjali Shree's fiction leaves us with a grounded, unromanticized vision of human coexistence. Conflict, in her novels, is not a failure of civilization to be scrubbed away; it is the natural outcome of diverse human beings living together with different memories, needs, and identities. The real question her work poses is not how to eliminate conflict entirely, but what we choose to do with it when it arises.

Her answer is neither simple nor quick. Reconciliation cannot be engineered through technological solutions, political slogans, or forced forgetting. It is an ongoing, often uncomfortable practice that happens in small, daily choices—listening to an uncomfortable story, recognizing the quiet pain of a family member, or refusing to let political fear dictate how we view our neighbors.

As we navigate an era marked by rapid technological change, political polarization, and global uncertainty, Shree's stories remind us of what must not be lost. In the end, the work of building a compassionate world relies on our willingness to stay present to one another, to honor complex histories, and to recognize our shared vulnerability in a fragile world.

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