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Reimagining Widowhood, Mobility, and Voice in Geetanjali Shree's Tomb of Sand

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Abstract

Geetanjali Shree's **Tomb of Sand** provides a subversive turn to feminist subjectivity by engaging with old age, widowhood, and elderly mobility, which have hitherto remained marginalized in literature as well as feminist scholarship. This paper proposes that **Tomb of Sand** represents a feminist politics of refusal, which undercuts the conventional narratives associated with ageing, respectability, femininity, and the social visibility of women. The elderly widowed figure of Ma, who regains her mobility, desire, as well as narrative voice, after decades of enforced silence, subverts the patriarchal discourses that have historically associated femininity with youth, productivity, and reproductive capability.

In drawing on feminist theories of aging, feminist narrative ethics, and the field of memory studies, this analysis considers how **The Tomb of Sand** unsettles the idea of resistance not only as rebellion but also transformation, but instead locates it in the realm of reinvention through the politics of withdrawal and mobility. The unruly form of the novel, with its multilingual play, non-linear temporalities, and discourses that continuously thwart style, in turn cements the novel's feminist project in its defiance of narrative order and moral resolution.

Instead of the imperative of empowerment through coherence and resolution, **Tomb of Sand** holds out the reach for feminist agency as an unpredictable and unending process that happens across the life span. However, the novelty of the book lies not only in the way it inscribes older women's experiences and themselves through the trope of the **Tomb of sand**, but also through the way it subverts the theme of disappearance that usually happens with women after they become widowed and occupy the role of the "other" to the protagonist husband.

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1. Introduction

The feminist literary tradition has always favored narratives of rebellion, sexual awakening, and struggle in youth, thereby consigning old age to a point of closure, decay, or erasure. In the Indian cultural ethos, the role of the widow has been overdetermined with the demand for denial, silencing, and moral retreat, thereby rendering elderly women redundant, non-agentic, and passive subjects. In this light, Tomb of Sand, a feminist literary occurrence, becomes important because it focuses on an elderly woman, a widow, who resists erasure and instead regains her mobility, sexuality, and agency.

Tomb of Sand, the winner of the International Booker Prize, challenges both generic and ideological categorizations. Ma begins with Withdrawal into bed after her husband's death, which prima facie satisfies the normative notion of being a widow with withdrawal and passivity personified. Yet this moment of pause translates into mobilization as Ma becomes communicative, moves from place to place, and oversteps the limits of both family and national boundaries with age, gender, and propriety as her passport.

This paper contends that *The Tomb of Sand* establishes a feminist discourse in later life that draws on refusal as opposed to rebellion as a practice of feminism. The life trajectory of a widow is projected not as a destination but as a transitional zone for ethical reconstruction as a woman's life unfolds transnationally, transculturally, and transhistorically via the heroine's journey undertaken by Shree as she disrupts patriarchal, nationalist, and ageist discourses that restrict women's acts within society.

2. Review of Literature

Critical receptions of the* **Tomb of Sand*** have been generally appreciative of the form play, linguistic playfulness, and philosophical intentions of the novel. Critics and scholars have particularly pointed out how the novel resists a narrative structure that is linear, how the text is multilingual, and how the language playfully negotiates history, myth, and memory. The novel has been located in the literature post-Partition along the lines of the thematics of borders, displacement, and unworked traumatic memories.

A feminist critical approach to analyzing this novel could be to see it as related to Ma's transformation as it defies Patriarchal norms of being a widow as well as advancing in age. Analysts also emphasize that Shree reverses violent images of older women as passive, as Shree defies her own family as well as nationalist constructs. What is abnormal is that it tests constructs of silence as they apply to women.

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Nevertheless, a large part of the existing body of scholarship regards the transformation of Ma either symbolically or allegorically, without giving enough attention to ageing as a feminist category per se. The idea of old age, for instance, has been very often interpreted metaphorically, as a liberation from the constraints of society, instead of, as a structurally marginalized life experience based on gender-defined notions of productivity, use, and disappearance. Further, although the politics of mobility were acknowledged, refusal as a feminist ethics has not been theorized as a central point so far.

The gaps in the literature will be filled by the current study, which focuses on late-life feminism, feminist narrative ethics, and the study of memory. The current study argues that ***Tomb of Sand***presents a politics of refusal that contests ageist, patriarchal, and nationalist narratives and reinscribes old age as a space of ethics and politics.

3. Theoretical Framework

The paper relies on feminist theories of aging, as they critique the aging woman's marginalization within feminist thought as well as within cultural representations. Feminist gerontology holds that aging is not a gender-neutral biological condition, as a matter of fact, but a gender-defined category based on culturally ascribed notions of productivity, sexuality, and use value. In a patriarchal society, aging women can be made invisible once they lose their value as reproducers or as carers, a process that has paramount importance when interpreting ***Tomb of Sand***, whereby Ma's aging tests the boundaries of resistance over decline.

The analysis will also interact with feminist narrative ethics that privileges the complexity of ethics over moral judgment and defies traditional notions of coherence, redemption, or empowerment. By applying feminist narrative ethics, Ma's performance of her actions becomes no longer seen as eccentricity or rebellion, but as ethically positive engagements with her lifelong experience of silencing and regulation. Non-compliance in this context becomes a valid feminist position, as opposed to a lack or shortcoming.

Finally, the field of memory studies provides the impetus for the analysis of partition and trauma in the novel. Memory, in turn, is conceived not as an archive but as a disruptive, return-oriented factor troubling linear histories and nationalist narratives. Thus, all these frameworks allow the reading of the novel ***Tomb of Sand***in terms of locating feminist agency in refusal, mobility, and late-in-life reinvention.

4. Widowhood and the Politics of Invisibility

The condition of widowhood in Indian cultural stories has long been metaphorically linked to renunciation, asceticism, and isolation. The widow's required character structure eliminates desire, mobility, and individuality, as she becomes a metaphor for self-controlled

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values. **The Tomb of Sand** at first seems to be a very typical case, as Ma withdraws into bed after the death of her husband, refusing all sustenance, talk, or interaction with society. However, Geetanjali Shree contradicts this norm because withdrawal becomes the preamble to resistance when she treats the silence of Ma as gestational pauses rather than moments of erasure. This means that the silence and the moments of stillness find themselves gradually replaced with moments of movement and invisibility giving way to moments of disruption when Ma gradually becomes accessible through her manifestation of the emotions of presence at the emotional, verbal, and corporeal level through her assertion of existence because she defies the assumptions of her disappearance with the onset of the status.

"In this context, the figure of the widow emerges as a place of feminist refusal. Through the refusal of the role allocated to her, Ma subverts familial structures which aim to regulate the aged female body. In this way, her refusal illuminates the discomfort produced when widows disrupt their social death status. Shree turns the figure of the widow from one of moral rectitude to one of transition itself towards an ethics of politics, disrupting the patriarchal narrative of the silent, obedient woman associated with advancing age."

5. Late-Life Feminism and the Refusal of Closure

One of the most radical ways in which the novel portrays feminism is through the message that feminist agency has no limits in terms of time. Although Ma has been reborn, this happens in her old age, against the dominant discourse that links feminism to youth, rebellion, sex, or productive citizenship. Ma's actions: to speak out, to travel alone, to form new ties, redefine the limits of agency.

Importantly, Shree resists the formulation of the Ma's change in terms that would be inspirational and redemptive. There is no successful self-discovery, no story resolving in triumph. Rather, there is the closure of movement. This lacks the feminist realist commitment to the recognition that resistance itself might be partial, disturbed, and also ethnically ambiguous.

In refusing the closure of the story, the novel insists that feminist becoming remains an open and endless process. Ageing is no longer the final chapter in the story, with refusal being relegated to the background, but an important chapter in which the need to refuse becomes all the more pertinent.

Shree defies the literary and feminist tradition by resisting the provision of closure, which goes against the expected composition of a woman's narrative ending in coherence and redemption. **Tomb of Sand** therefore, broadens the feminist discourse by embracing the idea

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that in old age, resistance can be meaningful and potent without having to fill the void left by history and/or the loss of loved ones.

6. Mobility, Borders, and Feminist Reclamation

The crossing of national borders, especially her homecoming to Pakistan, is one of the strongest feminist statements made in the novel by the character of Ma. The act of mobility transcending an old woman's conventional restrictions becomes the assertion of the reconstruction of history, memory, and identity itself. Ma's mobility disrupts the constraints of the family as well as the nationalist tropes of women being defined by territorial borders. In this journey, the Partition memory returns not as trauma but as history, and this time it has to be grappled with in all its meanings. Ma's movement upends the sanctity of the border, with its arbitrary and violent history being laid bare. National borders and partitions are seen to be constructions, and the movement of women challenges patriarchal and national control. Feminist agency in **Tomb of Sand** is one of movement and not a settlement. Ma does not strive for belonging or reconciliation but exists in dislocation itself as a strategy of resistance. Ma's movement can be seen as ethically disruptive, disturbing the dominant narratives of the past.

Through the granting of physical and metaphorical mobility to the elderly woman, Shree broadens the feminist discourse to encompass the politics surrounding the mobility of the elderly. Ma's journey serves to confirm that resistance does not have to look towards home or closure but could instead be located in the refusal to be contained by all manner of borders.

7. Language, Voice, and Narrative Experimentation

The use of an experimental form in **Tomb of Sand** is one of the most important qualities that make it a feminist text. The way in which Geetanjali Shree uses words, genres, and voices playfully undermines controlling narratives. There are many instances in the novel that disregard the traditional notions of disciplined narration.

This formal rejection corresponds to the feminist rejection expressed by Ma. Similarly, Ma defies the rules of being a widow and an older woman, the story defies the conventions of being coherent, orderly, and instructively moral. Feminist voice is collective, fluid, and unstable in the novel.

In resisting the attempts to linguistically and narratively contain her, Shree defies the impulse to construct the story of women in any coherent, confessional, or redeemed fashion if they are to be intelligible. Through the non-conformant, experimental narrative structure, the feminist impulse of the book resides in not rendering the lives of women intelligible according to dominant discourses.

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Language itself becomes a site of resistance, a place of play over precision, of disruption instead of explanation. In this sense, **Tomb of Sand** integrates story experimentation and feminist ethics, proving that storytelling style and storytelling politics are one and the same.

8. Memory, Partition, and Feminist Counter-History
"The Partition in **Tomb of Sand** is the unattended historical presence that temporarily manifests through the trope of memory and movement. Unlike the nationalist histories, which try to achieve closure through the process of reconciliation, the book prefers to revisit the wounds again and again. Ma's experience through the trope of memory remains unhealing and unsettling.

Centering the memory of an elderly woman, Shree articulates a feminist counter-history that defies monumentization. Rather, women's memories function as disruptive elements that call into question the legitimacy of political borders and histories of forgetting. Instead, memory is understood as an ethical practice that troubles mainstream historiography.

Ma's experience highlights the way women's experiences of Partition remain marginalized from the official historical accounts, which emphasize political settlements and territorial realization. Via the experience articulated through the memory of Ma, the novel restores the unrequited histories of loss, uprootment, and desire.

In locating memory as volatile and repetitive, **The Tomb of Sand** reiterates that traumatic moments in the past are not to be solved. As such, the feminist counternarrative does not rewrite but refuses the erasure of the past.

9. Feminist Agency Without Triumph
The Tomb of Sand stubbornly resists the affirmation of feminist triumph. The liberation of Ma, as a feminine journey, does not lead towards reconciliation, towards an accomplishment of stability itself, or towards the constitution of a morally defined achievement of self.

This resistance positions the novel within feminist realism, which recognizes that resistance within oppressive structures may not lead to positive change or closure. Shree rejects liberal feminist tropes of empowerment as liberation through resolution or recognition. Rather, feminist empowerment is located in persistence, movement, and refusal.

Ma lives not beyond, but rather alongside, the histories of trauma, loss, and suffering. Her resistance is not heroic, but rather disruptive, against the structures that require the erasure of women with age. Feminism, in this case, is not an endpoint, but an action.

Through the refusal of victory, "**Tomb of Sand**" extends the feminist discourse to encompass a range of agencies that, in terms of ethics, prove highly disturbing. "Resisting is not the

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same thing as winning, but resisting is winning. It is the refusal to comply with the systems that imprison women's lives."

10. Conclusion

This research has presented the case for **Tomb of Sand** being the articulation of an extremely radical feminist discourse in older age, informed by the politics of refusal, movement, and subjective transformation. Through its radical focus on an elderly woman who regains her voice and her movement, Shree disrupts the discourses of ageism, patriarchism, and nationalism, which frame the possibilities of womanly agency. **Tomb of Sand** augments the feminist literary discourses in India by proclaiming the determination to resist, unencumbered by the agendas of youth, productiveness, or conclusion.

In this way, "**Tomb of Sand**" opens up feminism as an act of continuous negation in place of feminism as an accomplished fact. Shree insists that feminism can express itself at any age, not via triumph or resolution, but via constant subversive action on the structures that require the silence and erasure of women.

In highlighting the themes of ageing, memory, and movement, this novel restores the final decades of life to the category of feminist potential rather than loss. **Tomb of Sand** ultimately asserts the power of refusal, a refusal to vanish, to reconcile, to conform to the norms of society is a feminine ethos at its best and through this, the landscape of the feminist imaginary of the literature of India is transformed and the idea of resistance existing wherever women refuse to live within the confines allotted to their lives is reaffirmed.

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