
Fractured Selves: Dual Identities and Postcolonial Subjectivity in Geetanjali Shree's *Tomb of Sand*

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Abstract: *Geetanjali Shree's Tomb of Sand* (originally "Ret Samadhi," 2018), winner of the 2022 International Booker Prize, presents a profound exploration of fractured identities within the postcolonial South Asian context. This paper examines how Shree constructs dual identities among her characters, particularly focusing on the protagonist Ma and her family members, to illuminate the complex negotiations between tradition and modernity, past and present, and self and society that characterize postcolonial subjectivity. Through the theoretical frameworks of Homi Bhabha's concepts of hybridity and the "third space," Gayatri Spivak's notion of the subaltern voice, and Ashis Nandy's analysis of postcolonial psychology, this study reveals how Shree's characters embody the fundamental contradictions and multiplicities inherent in postcolonial identity formation. The paper argues that these dual identities serve not merely as literary devices but as authentic representations of the postcolonial condition, where subjects must constantly navigate between conflicting cultural, temporal, and spatial frameworks to construct coherent yet necessarily fragmented selves.

Keywords: *Postcolonial literature, dual identity, hybridity, South Asian literature, Geetanjali Shree, contemporary Indian fiction*

Introduction: The landscape of contemporary South Asian literature has been profoundly shaped by the ongoing negotiation between tradition and modernity, colonial legacies and postcolonial aspirations, local rootedness and global connectivity. Within this complex terrain, Geetanjali Shree's *Tomb of Sand* emerges as a particularly significant work that captures the multifaceted nature of postcolonial identity through its intricate portrayal of characters who embody fundamental dualities. The novel, set against the backdrop of Partition's lingering shadows and contemporary India's rapid transformations, presents characters whose identities are neither fixed nor singular but exist in constant flux between competing poles of experience and understanding.

The concept of dual identity in postcolonial literature extends beyond simple binary oppositions to encompass the complex psychological and cultural negotiations that individuals must undertake in societies marked by colonial histories and ongoing modernization processes. These dualities manifest not as neat divisions but as dynamic tensions that shape consciousness, behaviour, and social relationships. In *Tomb of Sand*, Shree masterfully employs these dual identities to explore broader themes of belonging, displacement, memory, and transformation that characterize the postcolonial condition. This paper seeks to examine how Shree constructs and deploys dual identities throughout the novel, with particular attention to the ways these constructions illuminate fundamental aspects of postcolonial subjectivity. Through detailed analysis of key characters and their psychological, cultural, and social negotiations, this study argues that Shree's portrayal of dual identities serves as both a literary strategy and a profound commentary on the nature of selfhood in postcolonial societies.

Theoretical Framework: Postcolonial Theory and Identity Formation: To understand the significance of dual identities in *Tomb of Sand*, it is essential to ground the analysis within established postcolonial theoretical frameworks that address the formation of subjectivity in postcolonial contexts. Homi Bhabha's concept of hybridity provides a crucial lens through which to examine how Shree's characters navigate between different cultural and temporal frameworks. Homi Bhabha argues that postcolonial subjects exist in a "third space" where cultural meanings and identities are negotiated, creating hybrid forms that are neither purely traditional nor completely modern but something entirely new.

This hybridization process is particularly relevant to understanding the dual identities in Shree's work, as characters must constantly negotiate between competing cultural codes, linguistic frameworks, and social expectations. The resulting identities are not simply combinations of different elements but represent genuine innovations that emerge from the creative tensions between conflicting systems of meaning.

Gayatri Spivak's analysis of the 'subaltern voice' offers another crucial theoretical foundation for understanding how dual identities function in the novel. Spivak's famous question, "Can the subaltern speak?" highlights the complex ways in which marginalized voices must navigate dominant discourses to achieve articulation. In *Tomb of Sand*, many characters, particularly women, embody this subaltern condition, developing dual identities as strategies for both survival and resistance within patriarchal and socially restrictive environments.

Ashis Nandy's psychological analysis of postcolonial identity provides additional insight into the internal dimensions of dual identity formation. Nandy argues that colonialism creates fundamental psychological splits within colonized subjects, leading to internalized conflicts between different aspects of selfhood. These internal divisions persist long after formal decolonization, manifesting in various forms of cultural and psychological ambivalence that continue to shape individual and collective identity.

Building upon these theoretical foundations, this analysis will examine how Shree's characters embody and negotiate these complex identity formations, revealing both the challenges and creative possibilities inherent in postcolonial subjectivity.

The Architecture of Dual Identity: Ma's Transformative Journey: The most compelling exploration of dual identity in *Tomb of Sand* centres on the character of Ma, whose psychological and social transformation drives much of the novel's narrative energy. Ma's dual identity manifests most clearly in her radical shift from a traditional, grieving widow to an adventurous, boundary-crossing woman who defies social expectations and embarks on an unprecedented journey to Pakistan.

Initially, Ma embodies the archetypal figure of the Indian widow: silent, withdrawn, and seemingly resigned to a life defined by loss and social invisibility. This identity is deeply rooted in traditional Hindu concepts of widowhood, where women are expected to retreat from active social participation following their husband's death. Ma's early behaviour conforms to these expectations as she withdraws into silence and apparent depression, fulfilling the social role prescribed for women in her position.

However, Shree reveals this traditional identity to be only one dimension of Ma's complex subjectivity. The transformation that follows Ma's emergence from her period of mourning reveals the existence of an entirely different identity that had been suppressed or dormant. This second identity is characterized by curiosity, rebelliousness, and a fierce independence that challenges both familial expectations and broader social norms. Nabanita Chakraborty believes that Geetanjali Shree's narrative 'digresses, pauses, repeats and compulsively returns to the subject of the maternal body.' The novel is the story of the old mother, her 'repressed desires' and the surrounding mysteries of her body and life. On the face of it, the narrative does not emphasise the historic moment of division of the country or the subsequent horrors of riots and violence. 'Instead, the rhythmic movement and unfurling of the aged female body measure the time of the narrative.'

The duality of Ma's identity extends beyond simple behavioural changes to encompass fundamental shifts in her relationship to language, space, and time. Her decision to learn Urdu represents more than practical preparation for her journey to Pakistan; it constitutes a linguistic crossing that connects her to suppressed aspects of subcontinental history and identity. Through Urdu, Ma accesses cultural and emotional territories that had been rendered invisible by the linguistic divisions enforced by Partition.

Ma's physical journey to Pakistan serves as an external manifestation of her internal identity transformation. The border crossing becomes a metaphor for the psychological boundaries she transcends, moving from a constrained, socially determined identity to one that she actively constructs through her choices and actions. This geographical transgression

parallels her psychological liberation from traditional constraints, revealing how physical and psychological territories intersect in the formation of postcolonial identity.

The temporal dimensions of Ma's dual identity are equally significant. Her past self, defined by traditional roles and expectations, exists simultaneously with her transformed present self, creating a complex layering of identities across time. This temporal multiplicity reflects the broader postcolonial condition, where individuals must navigate between different historical moments and their associated identity formations.

Shree's portrayal of Ma's dual identity avoids simple celebration of liberation or condemnation of tradition. Instead, it presents a nuanced exploration of how individuals negotiate between different aspects of selfhood, recognizing both the constraints and possibilities inherent in various identity positions. Ma's transformation does not represent a complete rejection of her previous identity but rather an expansion that incorporates new possibilities while maintaining connections to her past.

Intergenerational Identity Conflicts: The Daughter's Perspective: The novel's exploration of dual identities extends beyond Ma to encompass the complex relationships between different generations, particularly through the perspective of Ma's daughter, who serves as both narrator and participant in the unfolding drama. The daughter's identity is fundamentally shaped by her position between generations, cultures, and expectations, creating a distinctive form of dual identity that reflects the specific challenges faced by middle-generation postcolonial subjects.

As a modern, educated woman, the daughter embodies many characteristics associated with postcolonial progress: professional achievement, urban sophistication, and apparent liberation from traditional constraints. However, her identity is simultaneously shaped by deep connections to family traditions, cultural practices, and emotional patterns inherited from previous generations. This creates an ongoing tension between her modern sensibilities and traditional attachments that manifests in various aspects of her life and relationships.

The daughter's dual identity becomes particularly apparent in her responses to Ma's transformation. Her initial resistance to Ma's unconventional behaviour reflects her internalization of social norms that define appropriate behaviour for women of different ages and social positions. Yet her eventual support for Ma's journey reveals another dimension of her identity that values individual autonomy and self-determination over social conformity.

This generational dynamic illuminates how dual identities are not simply individual phenomena but are shaped by complex intergenerational negotiations. The daughter must navigate between her role as a dutiful daughter, responsible for maintaining family stability and social respectability, and her identity as a modern woman who theoretically supports women's liberation and self-determination. These conflicting identities create ongoing

internal tensions that reflect broader societal contradictions between traditional values and modern aspirations.

The linguistic dimensions of the daughter's dual identity are particularly significant. As someone educated primarily in Hindi and English, she initially lacks access to the Urdu that becomes central to Ma's transformation. This linguistic gap represents broader cultural divisions that separate different generations of postcolonial subjects from aspects of their historical and cultural inheritance. The daughter's gradual engagement with Urdu parallels her growing understanding of the complex cultural and political histories that have shaped her family's experience.

Shree uses the daughter's perspective to explore how dual identities function within family systems, where individual transformations necessarily affect other family members and challenge established patterns of relationship and authority. The daughter's journey from resistance to acceptance of Ma's transformation reflects her own process of identity negotiation, as she learns to accommodate multiple, sometimes contradicting aspects of her family relationships and personal values.

Partition's Shadow: Historical Trauma and Identity Fragmentation: The historical context of Partition provides a crucial backdrop for understanding the dual identities that characterize Shree's novel. Partition represents not merely a political division but a fundamental rupture in subcontinental identity that continues to shape individual and collective consciousness decades after the actual events. The characters in *Tomb of Sand* inherit this historical trauma in various forms, leading to identity formations that are marked by division, loss, and ongoing negotiation between different aspects of cultural and national belonging.

Ma's family history reveals the ways in which Partition trauma is transmitted across generations, creating identity formations that are marked by absence, silence, and suppressed memories. The family's migration from areas that became Pakistan to India represents not simply a geographical relocation but a fundamental identity transformation that required the suppression of certain cultural and linguistic connections in favour of new national and religious identifications.

This historical background helps explain the significance of Ma's decision to visit Pakistan, which represents not merely a personal journey but an attempt to reconnect with suppressed aspects of collective and individual identity. Her crossing of the India-Pakistan border becomes a symbolic healing of the historical wound created by Partition, an attempt to restore connections that were severed by political divisions.

The novel reveals how Partition trauma manifests in dual identities that are characterized by simultaneous belonging and alienation. Characters maintain deep emotional and cultural connections to places, languages, and traditions that have been rendered

politically inaccessible, creating identities that exist partially in exile from themselves. This internal exile creates the psychological conditions for dual identity formation, as individuals must develop alternative identity constructions to accommodate both their losses and their ongoing lives.

Shree's treatment of Partition trauma avoids simple nostalgia or political condemnation, instead focusing on the psychological and cultural dimensions of historical division. The novel shows how individuals develop creative strategies for managing inherited trauma, including the construction of dual identities that allow them to maintain connections to suppressed aspects of their heritage while functioning within contemporary political and social realities.

The intergenerational transmission of Partition trauma creates particularly complex identity formations among characters who did not directly experience the historical events but inherit their psychological and cultural effects. These characters must navigate between family memories and silences, official historical narratives and suppressed alternative accounts, creating identity formations that are marked by fundamental uncertainties about heritage, belonging, and historical truth.

Language and Identity: Multilingual Subjectivity: Language serves as a crucial site for the construction and expression of dual identities throughout "Tomb of Sand." Shree's multilingual narrative strategy reflects the complex linguistic landscape of contemporary South Asia, where individuals routinely navigate between multiple languages that carry different cultural, political, and emotional associations. This multilingual reality creates opportunities for identity multiplication, as different languages provide access to different aspects of selfhood and cultural belonging.

Ma's decision to learn Urdu represents a particularly significant linguistic transformation that parallels her broader identity changes. Urdu, as a language associated with Islamic culture and Pakistani national identity, had been largely excluded from Ma's previous linguistic repertoire, which centred on Hindi and regional languages. Her acquisition of Urdu represents not merely practical preparation for travel but a fundamental expansion of her cultural and emotional vocabulary.

The novel demonstrates how different languages carry different identity possibilities. Hindi, as the dominant national language of India, connects characters to official national identity and contemporary Indian culture. English provides access to global modernity and professional opportunities. Regional languages maintain connections to local cultural traditions and community belonging. Urdu opens pathways to suppressed aspects of subcontinental history and Islamic cultural traditions.

Characters' linguistic choices reflect their ongoing negotiations between different aspects of their dual identities. Code-switching between languages allows for the expression

of different identity facets within single conversations or even individual sentences. This linguistic multiplicity mirrors the psychological multiplicity that characterizes postcolonial subjectivity, where individuals must constantly navigate between different cultural and social frameworks.

Shree's own narrative strategy embodies this multilingual complexity, incorporating words, phrases, and cultural references from multiple languages in ways that reflect the actual linguistic practices of contemporary South Asian communities. This narrative multilingualism serves not merely as a realistic representation but as a literary strategy for expressing the fundamental multiplicity that characterizes postcolonial identity.

The novel also explores how linguistic access and exclusion shape identity possibilities. Characters' limited access to certain languages restricts their ability to engage with particular cultural traditions or historical narratives, contributing to the fragmentation that characterizes their identity formations. Conversely, linguistic learning opens new identity possibilities, as demonstrated by Ma's transformation through her engagement with Urdu.

Gender and Dual Identity: Navigating Patriarchal Constraints: Gender provides another crucial lens through which to examine dual identities in *Tomb of Sand*. Shree's female characters must navigate between traditional gender roles that prescribe specific behaviours and social positions and modern possibilities that offer alternative identity constructions. This navigation creates particularly complex dual identities that reflect both the constraints and creative possibilities inherent in contemporary South Asian women's experiences.

Ma's transformation from traditional widow to adventurous traveller represents a dramatic shift between different gender identity possibilities. Her initial conformity to widowhood expectations reflects the internalization of patriarchal norms that define women primarily in relation to their husbands and family responsibilities. Her later rebellion against these expectations reveals alternative gender identity possibilities that prioritize individual autonomy and self-determination.

The novel explores how women develop dual identities as survival strategies within patriarchal social systems. Public conformity to traditional gender expectations allows women to maintain social acceptance and family harmony, while private identity constructions provide spaces for alternative self-expression and personal development. This dual identity formation reflects what James Scott terms "hidden transcripts" – alternative identity constructions that exist beyond the surveillance of dominant social groups.

Shree's portrayal of women's dual identities avoids simple celebration of liberation or condemnation of tradition. Instead, it recognizes the complex negotiations that women must undertake as they balance competing demands and possibilities. The novel shows how

women's dual identities reflect both resistance to patriarchal constraints and accommodation of social realities that cannot be easily escaped or transformed.

The generational dimensions of women's dual identities receive particular attention in the novel. Different generations of women face different constraints and possibilities, leading to distinct forms of dual identity construction. Older women like Ma must negotiate between traditional expectations that were more rigidly enforced in their youth and contemporary possibilities that offer greater freedom. Younger women face different challenges as they navigate between modern opportunities and persistent patriarchal expectations.

The novel also explores how women's dual identities are shaped by class, education, and urban/rural distinctions. Middle-class, educated, urban women like the daughter have access to identity possibilities that may be unavailable to women in different social positions. These differences highlight how dual identity formation is not simply a matter of individual choice but is shaped by broader social and economic structures that create different identity possibilities for different groups of women.

Spatial Dynamics: Home, Border, and Belonging: The spatial dimensions of dual identity receive extensive exploration in *Tomb of Sand*, as characters navigate between different geographical and symbolic spaces that offer distinct identity possibilities. The novel's attention to spatial dynamics reflects the broader postcolonial concern with questions of belonging, displacement, and the relationship between identity and place.

The concept of home emerges as particularly complex in the novel, as characters maintain simultaneous connections to multiple locations that serve different functions in their identity constructions. Ma's family home represents traditional identity and intergenerational continuity, while her journey to Pakistan opens access to alternative homeland connections that had been suppressed by political divisions.

The India-Pakistan border serves as both a physical barrier and a psychological boundary that characters must negotiate in their identity constructions. Ma's crossing of this border represents not merely geographical movement but a transgression of identity boundaries that had been established by Partition and maintained through subsequent political and social arrangements.

The novel explores how different spaces activate different aspects of characters' dual identities. Urban spaces like Delhi provide access to modern identity possibilities characterized by cosmopolitanism, professional opportunities, and relative social freedom. Rural or traditional spaces maintain connections to cultural practices and social relationships that anchor identity in intergenerational continuity and community belonging.

Shree's attention to spatial mobility reveals how movement between different spaces allows characters to activate different aspects of their dual identities. Travel becomes a mechanism for identity exploration and transformation, as characters encounter different social arrangements and cultural possibilities that expand their understanding of identity options.

The novel also examines how spatial restrictions limit identity possibilities. The political boundaries created by Partition prevent characters from accessing geographical spaces that would allow for the full expression of their cultural and emotional identities. These spatial restrictions contribute to the fragmentation that characterizes postcolonial identity, as individuals must develop alternative strategies for maintaining connections to suppressed aspects of their heritage.

Memory and Forgetting: Temporal Dimensions of Identity: The relationship between memory and identity receives extensive treatment in *Tomb of Sand*, as characters navigate between different temporal frameworks that offer competing versions of selfhood and cultural belonging. The novel explores how memory serves both as a resource for identity construction and as a source of psychological burden that must be managed through various strategies of remembering and forgetting.

Ma's journey represents an attempt to recover suppressed memories and cultural connections that had been rendered invisible by political divisions and social changes. Her engagement with Pakistan allows her to access aspects of subcontinental history and culture that had been excluded from official Indian national narratives and family memories.

The novel reveals how forgetting serves as both an adaptive strategy and a source of identity fragmentation. Characters develop selective forgetting as a means of managing historical trauma and adapting to new social and political circumstances. However, this forgetting also contributes to identity fragmentation, as individuals lose access to aspects of their heritage and experience that might otherwise contribute to more integrated identity constructions.

Shree explores how different generations maintain different relationships to memory and forgetting. Older characters like Ma carry direct memories of pre-Partition life that younger characters access only through family narratives and cultural transmission. These generational differences in memory access create distinct challenges for identity construction, as different generations must develop different strategies for managing the relationship between past and present.

The novel also examines how collective memory and individual memory intersect in identity construction. Characters must navigate between official historical narratives and family memories, public commemorations and private recollections, creating identity

constructions that synthesize multiple, sometimes contradictory sources of historical understanding.

The temporal multiplicity that characterizes postcolonial experience creates particular challenges for identity construction, as individuals must simultaneously inhabit multiple historical moments and their associated identity possibilities. Shree's characters develop dual identities partly as strategies for managing this temporal complexity, maintaining connections to different historical moments while functioning within contemporary social and political arrangements.

Resistance and Accommodation: Dual Identity as Strategy: The dual identities explored in *Tomb of Sand* function not merely as psychological phenomena but as strategic responses to the challenges of postcolonial life. Characters develop dual identities as mechanisms for both resistance to oppressive social arrangements and accommodation of circumstances that cannot be easily changed or escaped.

Ma's transformation represents a form of resistance to social expectations that would confine her to a narrow identity defined by widowhood and ageing. Her development of an adventurous, boundary-crossing identity challenges patriarchal and ageist assumptions about appropriate behaviour for women in her social position. However, this resistance is balanced by ongoing accommodation of family relationships and social realities that require negotiation rather than outright rejection.

The novel explores how dual identities allow characters to maintain some degree of agency within constraining circumstances. By developing alternative identity constructions, characters create psychological and cultural spaces for self-expression and personal development that might otherwise be unavailable within their social circumstances.

Shree's treatment of resistance and accommodation avoids simple binary oppositions between compliance and rebellion. Instead, the novel reveals how dual identities allow for complex negotiations that combine elements of both resistance and accommodation in ways that maximize individual agency while maintaining necessary social connections and relationships.

The strategic dimensions of dual identity become particularly apparent in the novel's exploration of women's experiences. Female characters develop dual identities that allow them to navigate patriarchal constraints while maintaining access to alternative identity possibilities. These strategic identity constructions reflect both the limitations and creative possibilities inherent in women's positions within contemporary South Asian societies.

The novel also examines how dual identities function as collective strategies that extend beyond individual psychology to encompass family and community dynamics. Characters' identity negotiations affect other family members and contribute to broader

processes of social and cultural change that occur through accumulated individual transformations.

Conclusion:

The Significance of Dual Identity in Postcolonial Literature: Geetanjali Shree's *Tomb of Sand* offers a profound exploration of dual identity that illuminates fundamental aspects of postcolonial subjectivity and experience. Through her complex portrayal of characters who embody multiple, sometimes contradictory identity possibilities, Shree reveals how individuals navigate the psychological, cultural, and social challenges that characterize life in postcolonial societies.

The novel's exploration of dual identity extends beyond simple literary device to constitute a genuine contribution to understanding how postcolonial subjects construct coherent yet necessarily multiple selves within circumstances marked by historical trauma, cultural fragmentation, and ongoing social transformation. Shree's characters demonstrate that dual identity represents not pathology or confusion but creative adaptation to complex social and historical circumstances that require flexible and multiple identity strategies.

The theoretical frameworks provided by postcolonial studies prove essential for understanding the broader significance of Shree's literary exploration. Concepts such as hybridity, the third space, and subaltern voice help illuminate how the dual identities portrayed in the novel reflect broader patterns of postcolonial identity formation that extend far beyond individual psychology to encompass collective historical experience and cultural transformation.

The novel's attention to multiple dimensions of identity – including gender, generation, language, space, and memory – reveals the complexity of postcolonial subjectivity that resists simple categorization or analysis. Shree's characters embody intersectional identities that require multiple theoretical approaches and analytical strategies to fully understand their significance and implications.

Perhaps most significantly, *Tomb of Sand* demonstrates how literature serves as a crucial site for exploring and representing the complexities of postcolonial identity that might be difficult to capture through other forms of analysis or representation. Shree's narrative strategies, including her multilingual approach and complex temporal structure, provide literary methods for representing identity multiplicities that parallel the psychological and cultural multiplicities experienced by her characters.

The novel's exploration of dual identity ultimately suggests that multiplicity and fragmentation need not be understood simply as problems to be solved but as fundamental characteristics of postcolonial experience that require recognition, understanding, and creative navigation. Shree's characters demonstrate that dual identities can serve as resources

for both individual development and broader social transformation, providing mechanisms for maintaining cultural connections while adapting to changing circumstances.

The significance of *Tomb of Sand* extends beyond its specific cultural context to offer insights relevant to understanding identity formation in various postcolonial societies and other contexts marked by cultural multiplicity and historical complexity. The novel's exploration of how individuals negotiate between competing identity possibilities provides valuable perspectives for understanding contemporary global experience characterized by increasing cultural contact, mobility, and change.

In conclusion, Geetanjali Shree's *Tomb of Sand* represents a significant contribution to postcolonial literature that offers profound insights into the nature of identity formation and cultural transformation in contemporary South Asian society. Through her nuanced exploration of dual identities, Shree illuminates both the challenges and creative possibilities inherent in postcolonial experience, providing literary representation of the complex negotiations that characterize contemporary life in postcolonial societies. The novel's exploration of dual identity serves as both a literary achievement and an analytical contribution to understanding the ongoing processes of cultural and psychological transformation that continue to shape postcolonial societies and their inhabitants.

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