

An Exploration of Female Agency and Gender Resistance in the Selected Novels of Geetanjali Shree

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Abstract:

*Geetanjali Shree's fiction continues to revolve around women who live in the confines of the north Indian home, but her novels are infrequent jaunts toward female freedom as a departure from North Indian homes. In two of her novels, *Mai: Silently Mother* and *Tomb of Sand*, this paper explores ways in which agency and gender resistance are articulated in the text, and also questions the nature of the form as a means to bringing to light kinds of resistance that are generally ignored in the telling of narratives about liberation. The study examines characterization, the voice of the story, silence, the female body, mobility and the mother-daughter bond, a qualitative interpretive framework informed by existing feminist scholarship about Shree and based on close reading. Drawing on the obvious parallels between the two texts, the analysis enters into each one to consider its tension between withheld endurance (the performance of agency) and the slow maturation of a reading, of a narrating child's, daughter's, widow's, queens' and borders' (the beginning of recorded histories) growing speed. Both texts are resistant, but they come at a cost, and with a contradiction. The paper also includes a comparison reading which juxtaposes the strategies of silence and movement as discourses of female self-determination in the fiction of Shree.*

1. Introduction

Feminist literary criticism has now left behind the issue of whether women in fiction resist patriarchy. What resistance looks like when it's not rebellion, is the sharper question now: When it's firm in a bent back, or when it is turned to the wall of a face, or when it is late, or when it is unexpected. Geetanjali Shree's novels come at a hard nudge and a push on this very argument. Her women rarely stroll up and au-sh! The door! She hardly ever sees her women walk out of the house with a slamming of the door. They stay. They bend, withdraw, wait... Then, perhaps sometimes they move.

Since the *Tomb of Sand* has been popular internationally, there has been a significant surge of interest in Shree, which was called a milestone in the "eventual literary history" by Saxena. The ensuing reviews read the novel

from a feminist perspective; some as a novel about the female subject within the confines of patriarchy (Sharma and Verma 50–54), others as feminist metafiction (Jha) or as a text about the control and resistance of bodies to the social norms (Mitchi and Vinusuthan 11–13). She created her own collection on motherhood, oppression and women's presence via her earlier novel, *Mai: Silently Mother* (Kottawar and Vaidhya 23-27). What's still underpinned is a reading that unites the pair and asks how agency does so across widely different contexts that much more heavily frame them.

That difference matters. After the husband's death, quietness is read as defeat by the children of *Mai*, who serves as the subject of the first half of the book, while *Tomb of Sand* is about the usually reclusive mother who is coming out. When the two novels are side by side, they raise a question that neither could give an answer to by itself: is it agency when we endure silently, or agency when we don't? And does defiant neutrality elude the structures which it challenges, or simply shift them?

In this study, those two novels will be the only ones that will be used. Shree's *Our City That Year* is not in the scope of the present study on spatial justice and poetics of resistance (Pourya Asl 129-46), this study focusing more on communal violence and the city. It is easy to see why it is necessary to closely follow a narrative plan. But in addition to its action, or lack thereof, patriarchy-based notions of agency in stories by women ignore how stories are formed voice, digression, perspective, image as well as plot.

2. Review of Relevant Literature

The provided scholarship is broadly in three clusters, but there is some overlap.

The first, and largest of the two groups, reads *Tomb of Sand* as a feminist text. One reading attempts to study the novel in a feminist manner (Sharma and Verma 50-54), whereas another reading pushes the lens to transnational feminism and cultural identity (Nithiyasri and Pandey A221-A225) which is fitting for an eventual crossing of the India-Pakistan border. The following, sharper rendition of this argument reads the novel via mobility, memory and feminist resistance under the suggestive banner of "unbordering" womanhood (Yadav and Yadav 314–20). The novel's focus moves from theme to form as attention turns to feminist metafiction (Jha). In a sense, a valuable note of ambivalence comes in with the reading of the body that shuffles the novel between rejecting and affirming gestures, warning against the reading of every gesture of the protagonist as liberatory (Mitchi and Vinusuthan 11-13). Conn or responses from above soon brings into juxtaposition resistance with vulnerability as in Amrita Pritam's *Pinjar*, rather than juxtaposing the two (Konar 66–71).

A second focus is given to *Mai*. Previous studies focus on motherhood and oppression in the novel ("Exploring Motherhood") and women and nature in the novel (Kottawar and Vaidhya 23-27) and ecofeminism approach on the negotiation of gender and nature (Das and Jha 141-152). Taken together these works set up *Mai* as a work of the cost of femaleness in the home. It is noteworthy that more the ecofeminist element, which takes this

discussion away from the domestic realm and asks what connection can be made between the domination of the natural world and the domination of women. In this cluster however, it is more about what Mai is suffering than what she may be doing.

The third cluster is on relationships and memory across texts. In *Tomb of Sand*, the mother–daughter relationship is studied, highlighting issues of becoming and selfhood (Molla 95-118). Shree has further featured in an examination of gender and memory (Chaturvedi and Ahsan 64–70) and in a study of ‘women’s identity in Indian English fiction’ (Mannan 994–98). Of the resources supplied, only one looks at both *Mai* and *Tomb of Sand*, discussing a variety of female experience in both works (Srivastava 290-308).

That’s a comparison that reveals that both novels are readable as conversation. Nonetheless, the scholarship provided here is not as much focused on exploring the potentialities for both Mai’s silence and Ma’s mobility in *Tomb of Sand* as being manifestations of agency, and on the particular constraints of each kind of agency. The narrower question of the present paper is: What helps keep families happily together?

3. Research Objectives

1. To examine the representation of female agency and women’s self-determination in Geetanjali Shree’s *Mai: Silently Mother* and *Tomb of Sand*.
2. To analyse the literary strategies through which these two novels represent gender resistance and negotiate patriarchal power structures.

4. Research Methodology

The study applies the qualitative, interpretative approach in literary research, which is derived from close and critical reading of the texts. It comes from two novels of Geetanjali Shree, which are translated into English, and read as their main sources, namely *Mai: Silently Mother*, and *Tomb of Sand*. The critical works mentioned in the Works Cited are its secondary sources, which enrich, challenge and occasionally complicate the readings provided here.

This analysis focuses on characterization, the voice of the narrative and its perspective, the images that recur (the body, the wall, the border and silence) and on the development of the narration and portrayal of the gendered power in the house. The approach is comparative, due to the fact that there are two novels being analyzed; it is looking at where the texts agree and where they don’t agree, rather than searching them for one pattern. Each reading goes between the detail of the text and the interpretation and then back to the two research questions.

The study is informed by a general feminist critical approach not by any specific theoretical approach. It neither makes any empirical nor quantitative assertions. Due to this, no text is reproduced in the paper which are confirmed to be authentic parts of the novels, but rather the arguments are based on the interpretation of the narratives’ situation and structure.

5. Critical Analysis and Discussion

Female Agency, Identity and Self-Determination

It is truly difficult to find agency in *Mai*, and, surprise of surprises, the novel seems to be aware of this. Basically, *Mai* is only introduced to the reader through Sunaina, her daughter, who watches her mother as she works, bends, and defers to older and male. It seems quite logical to Sunaina and her brother that their mother must be rescued. But things slowly change in the novel. Education and the outside world teach them their model of freedom; the same applies for the vocabulary that they learn but not of something that *Mai* might have. What little is slowly admitted in the narration is that maybe *Mai* had another self-preserved, unspoken, not missing. In this way, the rescuers are part of the issue: their pity fosters the same familial tendency to determining what *Mai* becomes.

Tomb of Sand is unabashedly a reference to self-determination. Ma turns into the wall when her husband dies and doesn't go to bed as a bereaved widow to be taken care of by family. So, when she gets up, she doesn't go back to her old life and starts a new one, becoming friends with the gender-nonconformist Rosie in his home, ultimately demanding a trip across the border. One study asked it "When did I become me" (Molla 95–118) which in some respects summarizes this. In this novel identity is not static and taken as a possession of a particular side in the struggle it is subversive and is picked up by resistance. It's late and on the contrary, it's made.

The contrast is edifying. Join them in their dance of silence, or hear them, hear them, and turn deaf. Is there any choice for a woman who never speaks, or what if the woman who is always supposed to slip away starts?

Gender Resistance and Patriarchal Power

The idea of patriarchy in *Mai* is not performance, it's a habit. The novel's subordination is instilled in the household's daily routine, which is why critics have interpreted the novel as an examination of motherhood and oppression (Kottawar and Vaidhya 23–27). If there is resistance that is required to go in tandem with that. One of the novel's arguments is that Mai's capitulation might have created a protective netting for her children's expansion into a greater world; her perseverance may have filled a protective void that she children were too busy pitying her to notice. This is non-declared resistance, and that is subject to challenge!

Tomb of Sand has patriarchal authority spread out and acquainted. It shows up in the eldest son's devotion to his mother, for the family's expectations of old widows living out their lives, and for nationality, and religion, and the intolerance that since the past has imposed on women's bodies. Every one of them is upset by Ma's refusals. Her growing relationship with Rosie challenges the gendered binary that underpins the acceptance of family. The move to her independent daughter's house, Beti, who is her daughter, in turn sees an inversion where Beti will have to start raising her mother, and her own hard-fought independence is challenged. Resistance, that is not just banishing power, it's reshaping the relationship between women as well. This critical analysis of the body as site of resistance and reaffirmation from Mitchi and Vinusuthan (11–13) comes in particularly handy here. Ma's old body is the one

she is confined and is also used to repect the defiance of the family. The idea of unbordering takes things further: the last crossing is a meeting with or an infighting with history (Yadav and Yadav 314-20).

Narrative Strategies and the Representation of Women's Experiences

Form carries much of the argument in both novels. In *Mai*, the retrospective first-person narration of a daughter makes uncertainty structural. Sunaina cannot fully know her mother, so the reader cannot either. The title's emphasis on silence is not merely thematic; the novel declines to translate Mai's interiority into speech, and that refusal protects her from the very explanation her children wish to impose. Silence becomes a narrative choice, not only a social condition. There is a quiet irony in this arrangement. The daughter, educated and articulate, possesses the language her mother lacks, yet the story she tells keeps exposing the limits of that language. Her fluency cannot reach the place where her mother actually lives.

Tomb of Sand works in the opposite register. Its narration digresses, plays with language, comments on its own storytelling and at times hands its voice to non-human observers. A reading of the novel as feminist metafiction (Jha) shows why these matters: a narrative that openly questions how stories are told also questions who gets to tell them and which lives count as worth narrating. An old woman's life, conventionally treated as finished, becomes the centre of an exuberant, sprawling form. Even the images in the text participate in this. Ma's cane, decorated with butterflies, attaches lightness and transformation to an object associated with decline.

So, the two novels arrive at opposite formal solutions to a shared problem. *Mai* guards' women's experience by withholding it; *Tomb of Sand* liberates it by letting the narrative overflow.

Comparative Perspectives and the Limits of Resistance

Read together, these novels suggest that silence and movement are not opposites in Shree's fiction but points along a single continuum of agency. *Mai's* endurance and Ma's journey both resist a script that defines women through service and self-effacement. One works by keeping something back; the other by refusing to stay put.

Neither, however, escapes cost. *Mai's* resistance remains largely illegible, and its price is written on her body. A reading that celebrates her silence too eagerly risks romanticizing suffering, which is precisely the trap the narrating daughter must learn to avoid. Ma's freedom, for its part, rests partly on her daughter's home and her family's means, and her journey across the border ends in her death on the other side. The pairing of vulnerability with resistance (Konar 66–71) fits both cases well. So does the critical emphasis on memory (Chaturvedi and Ahsan 64–70): Ma's late defiance draws its force from a buried Partition past, which suggests that women's resistance in Shree is often a return to a suppressed history rather than a fresh beginning.

These limits also complicate any linear narrative of progress. The arc from submission to celebration (Mannan 994–98) describes a real movement in Indian English fiction, yet Shree's novels resist being placed neatly at either end of it. *Mai* is not simply submission, and *Tomb of Sand* is not simply celebration. Both hold the two in

tension. A final difference deserves attention. In *Mai*, the agency question passes from mother to daughter: Sunaina's growth into a woman who can leave depends, perhaps, on the mother who stayed. In *Tomb of Sand* the direction partly reverses, and the mother's late freedom tests the daughters. Shree seems less interested in a single liberated heroine than in how freedom moves, unevenly and at a price, between generations of women.

6. Conclusion

This paper aims to look into the agency and the gender resistance of the females in the work of Geetanjali Shree' *Mai: Silently Mother*' and *Tomb of Sand*. To attend to the first intention, the analysis revealed that the two novels conjure up images of self-determination very differently. In agency-dependent acts of selfhood, *Mai* finds in a hidden, unsaid sense of self, whereas *Tomb of Sand* shows an older widow, who is making new herself after some reluctance, an older self that demands respect but is not malevolent.

The study revealed that, on the second objective, there is form in the resistance system of both works. The shock that comes when the voice demanding explanations is not present may help to suspend silence and guard against its interpretative claims. The digressive, self-reflexive narration of the *tomb of sand* gives an old woman's life a size virtually denied to it, and images of the body, the wall and the border turn refusal personal and private into confrontation with family and history.

Again, there were apparent boundaries highlighted in the comparison. The ability of a person to endure silently may be romanticized, but open defiance relies upon material issues and in the case of *Tomb of Sand*, results in death. Resistance in these novels tames the women, it is no less than it means that they reverse gender relations. The study has a small-scale yet significant contribution, proposing a structuring of agency as conjunctions of "silence" and "movement" in the two novels. That trend continues in Shree's broader fiction, which can be explored in more distant readings from the texts in the corpus.

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