

GEETANJALI SHREE, *TOMB OF SAND* (TRANSLATED BY DAISY ROCKWELL)

Professor Tess Maginess



Queen's University Belfast & University
of Hyderabad: "Ageing in Literature:
Global South and Global North
Perspectives"

GEETANJALI SHREE



GEETANJALI SHREE'S BRIEF BIOGRAPHY

- Shree was born in the city of Mainpuri in Uttar Pradesh state on 12 June 1957. As her father, Anirudh Pandey, was a civil servant, her family lived in various towns of Uttar Pradesh. Shree says that it was this upbringing in Uttar Pradesh, along with a lack of children's books in English, that gave her a rich connection to Hindi.
- At university, she studied history. She completed a BA at Lady Shri Ram College, and a Master's degree from Jawaharlal Nehru University in New Delhi. After beginning her PhD work at Maharaja Sayajirao University of Baroda on the Hindi writer Munshi Premchand, Shree became more interested in Hindi literature. She wrote her first short story during her PhD, and turned to writing after graduation.
- Her first story, "Bel Patra" (1987), was published in the literary magazine *Hans* and was followed by a collection of short stories *Anugoonj* (1991).

Source: https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Geetanjali_Shree

Author Geetanjali Shree, left, kisses her translator Daisy Rockwell after they won the 2022 International Booker Prize author and translator awards for Shree's novel 'Tomb of Sand' in London.

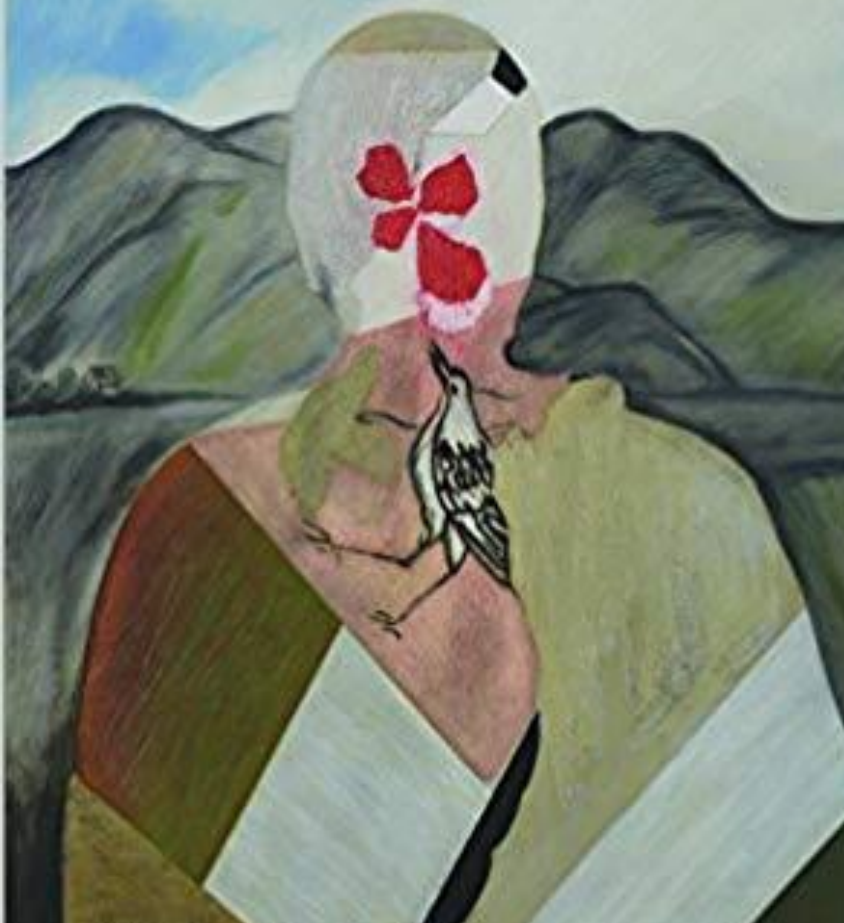


DAISY ROCKWELL'S BRIEF BIOGRAPHY

- Daisy Rockwell (born 1969) is an American Hindi and Urdu language translator and artist. She has translated a number of classic works of Hindi and Urdu literature, including Upendranath Ashk's *Falling Walls*, Bhisham Sahni's *Tamas*, and Khadija Mastur's *The Women's Courtyard*. Her 2021 translation of Geetanjali Shree's *Tomb of Sand* was the first South Asian book to win the International Booker Prize. Rockwell was awarded the 2023 Vani Foundation Distinguished Translator Award by the Vani Foundation and Teamwork Arts, during the 2023 edition of the Jaipur Literature Festival.
- Granddaughter of painter, Norman Rockwell.

Source: https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Daisy_Rockwell

रेत-समाधि



गीतांजलि श्री



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'A rambunctious tone and structure come together to form an insightful and very different addition to the genre of the so-called Partition novel.' - *The Wire*



GEETANJALI SHREE



SHORTLISTED FOR THE INTERNATIONAL BOOKER PRIZE 2022

TOMB of SAND

Translated by DAISY ROCKWELL

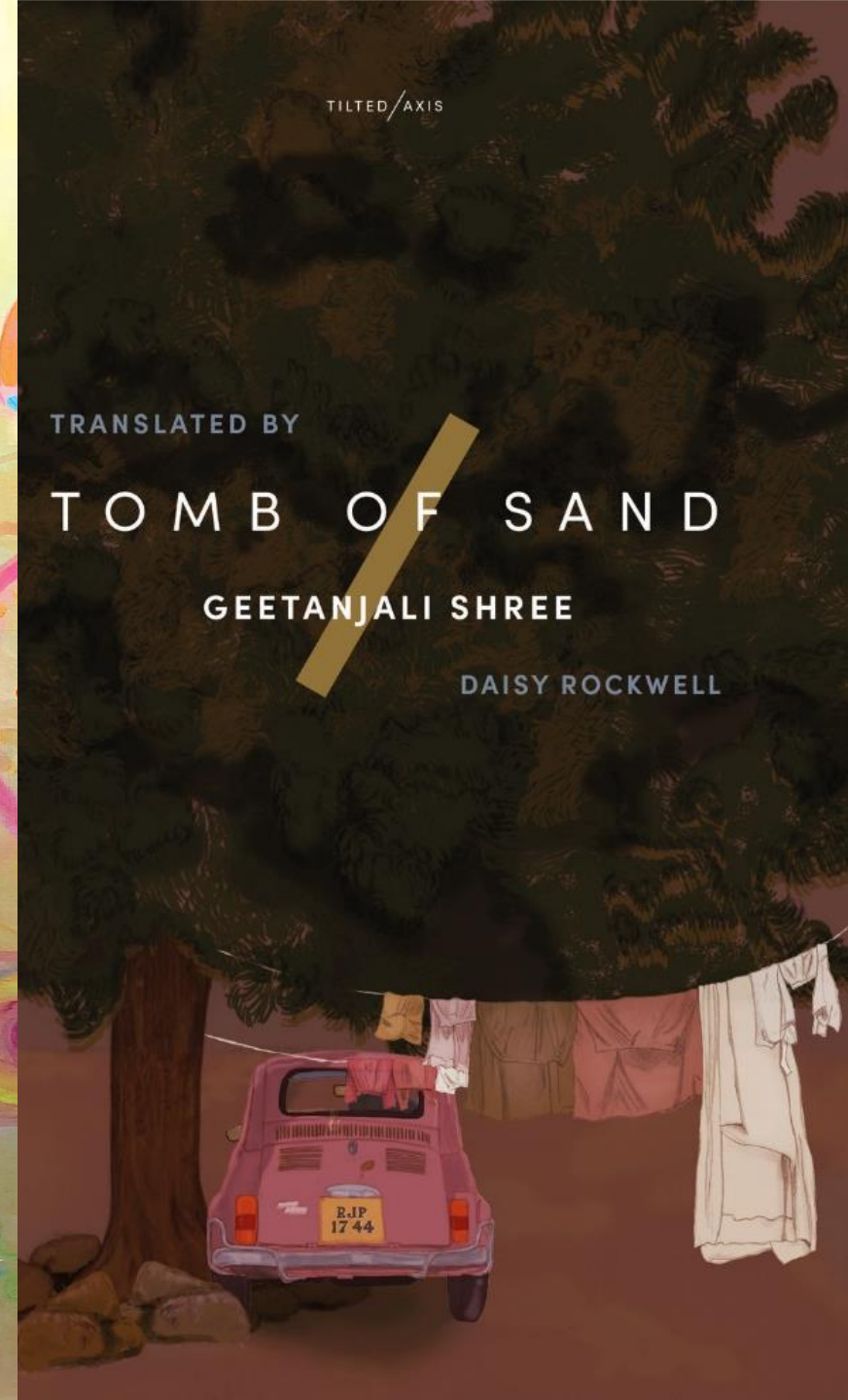
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TRANSLATED BY

TOMB OF SAND

GEETANJALI SHREE

DAISY ROCKWELL



SOME CRITICAL RESPONSES

‘...an iconoclastic, taboo-destroying eighty-year-old protagonist, destined to challenge one of her ancient culture’s central premises: that a widow should be hidden, isolated and shrouded in white. There is no one quite like Ma in contemporary literature... Her India is a place where walls glide, snakes talk, butterflies know their worth and people are too insignificant to have names. Indeed, in its boldness and experimentation – and in its likelihood of influencing a new generation of authors’ (Sonia Faliero, TLS, 29 July 2022).

[Tomb of Sand by Geetanjali Shree book review | The TLS \(the-tls.co.uk\)](#)

‘sweeping imagination and sheer power of language, unprecedented and uninhibited’ (Alka Saraogi, May 2019).

[Painting The Ordinary In Myriad Extraordinary Hues – The Book Review, Monthly Review of Important Books \(thebookreviewindia.org\)](#)



Queen's University Belfast & University of Hyderabad: "Ageing in Literature: Global South and Global North Perspectives"

SOME CRITICAL RESPONSES

- ‘Fiction allows one to taste possibilities. But its principal function is to record events whose truths cannot or couldn’t be documented by historians. It reveals the character of a time, age, and culture... Is it a Partition novel? Or a fiercely feminist fable? Or an utterly fresh candidate of the ‘stream of consciousness’ literature?... Perhaps something ground-breaking like *Tomb of Sand* must defy categorisation, for a new world demands rejection of the old ways of boxing, fetishizing, and labelling. It must stand as a testimony to itself.’ (Saurabh Sharma, 27 May 2022, Firstpost)

[Book Review: Geetanjali Shree’s *Tomb of Sand* is a border-bending work of fiction-Art-and-culture News , Firstpost](#)



RAGA SHREE

- ‘As an engineer, I used to believe that effective narrations are necessarily compact, linear and logical. ‘Tomb of Sand’ has none of these qualities; on the contrary, the long story builds up layer by layer, with complex metaphors blending into each other (if you have a technical mind, think of 3D printing instead of CNC machining!) – I must say that I am pleasantly surprised by Gitanjali Shree’s unconventional but effective mode of narration.’
- ‘I do not agree with the reviewers who say that the pace is slow. In fact, the book is divided into three parts and the pace of the story mirrors a Hindustani classical performance: a slow ‘alaap’, followed by a ‘khayal’ in madhya laya, and finally a high-speed ‘tarana’ which leaves one gasping for breath!’ (Atulya Sinha, 13 July 2022)

[Amazon.com: Customer reviews: Tomb of Sand](#)

Reflecting upon becoming **the first work of fiction in Hindi to make the Booker cut**, the 64-year-old author said it feels good to be the means of that happening.

‘But behind me and this book lies a rich and flourishing literary tradition in Hindi, and in other South Asian languages. World literature will be the richer for knowing some of the finest writers in these languages. The vocabulary of life will increase from such an interaction’, she said. (National Herald [India], 27 May 2022)

[Geetanjali Shree wins International Booker Prize for first Hindi novel 'Tomb of Sand' \(nationalheraldindia.com\)](https://www.nationalheraldindia.com)



SOME THEMES AND TECHNIQUES

- Two hours is much too short to offer more than a glimpse into the rich interior of this novel, so we will indicate from the earlier sections, as the novel establishes its signature, some of the main themes and techniques.
- **Themes** include:
 - Emphasis on family
 - Gender roles and tensions
 - Tradition and modernity
 - The politics of Partition
 - Patronage and politics

STYLE AND TECHNIQUES

- Genre – **polyphonic** - Realism, adventure story, fantasy, magic realism, fable, satire, ecofiction, metafiction...
- Consequently, a strong **emphasis on story itself** as border-crossing, Promethean, myriad.
- **Borders** as a recursive motif.
- Consequently, a **panoply of styles**, lyric tenderness, playful humour, biting satire, sharp observation of the sensory world, catalogue, irony.
- **Short chapters** emphasise mood and register shifts.
- **Characterisation** – there are few villains, but there are some. We have human and animal characters (anthromorphic), often of great wisdom and courage, especially the crow (apparently a common bird in south Asian fiction). The **ability of characters to change, to dissolve or cross borders** is a key element.
- **Plot** -often **slow-** moving with extraordinary and **unexpected twists**, use of set pieces, e.g. Bade's retirement.
- A non-chronological handling of time – **flashback and flashforward**.
- A range of **locales**, domestic, natural, pleasant, hostile.
- **Shifting points of view** within a mostly omniscient narrator who occasionally draws attention to her/his own unimportance.

OPENING THOUGHTS

- 'From the outset, the author draws attention to the **fictive world** we, as readers, are occupying. The novel can be seen as **experimental** in the tradition of the western metafictional novel.
- Examples include: Sterne's *Tristram Shandy*, Flann O'Brien's *At-Swim-Two-Birds*, Italo Calvino's *If on a Winter's Night a Traveller*, John Barth, *Lost in the Funhouse*.
- Yet, there is an essential difference: while the western novels are preoccupied with the multiplying ironies of determining what and who is real and what and who is illusory, the emphasis here is on the **promethean possibilities of story itself**, even in what may seem the most unpromising of 'realities'.

Allied to or contingent upon that difference are some others:

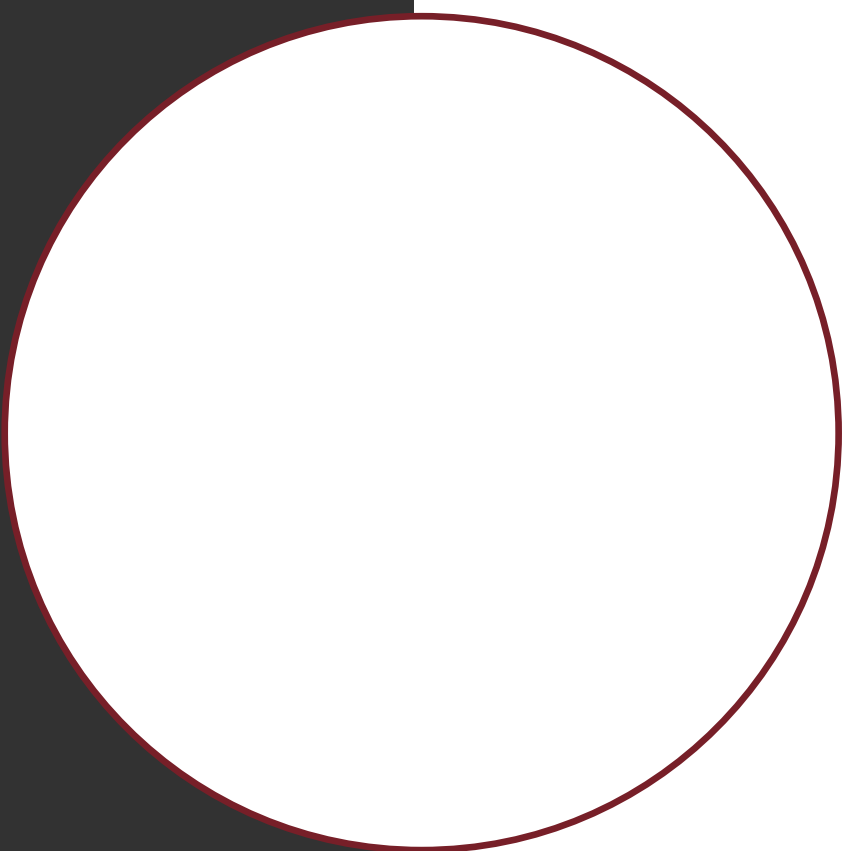
- That **stories are mysterious, teasing, riddling.**
- That **nature is about every blade of grass, but also cosmic** – a very Blakean outlook – the universe in a grain of sand, but, Blake himself, lest we forget, was influenced by Hindu and Buddhist concepts.
- **Nature** is very important in the book, and here too, unlike the more typical Western focus, man – and woman – are not the only show in town. This will lead to a certain concern with the environment.
- That because **stories can be made from anything**, it follows that **many tones and moods are possible**. So, in this, Shree is like other Indian writers like Kiran Desai, but also Irish writers like Flann O'Brien. The novel moves effortlessly from the sardonic to the tender, from magic to realism, from playfulness to mordant satire. This may also be due, in part, to histories of colonialism where no tone or mood can be possible in a deeply destabilised world, or/and, a postmodern world.





- Like any good novel, the first paragraph or two operate like a kind of **overture to the concerns and motifs** of the story.
- So Shree offers us some hints about the story's main characters, including, might we add, story itself.
- There is also a foreshadowing, a **riddling prolepsis about what is going to happen.**
- The focus seems to shift, teasingly perhaps in that advance notice. We begin with a kind of sardonic annunciation that there will be a death.

- The tone then shifts to an almost playful **‘direct address’ (apostrophe) to the reader**, possibly ironic, hinting at the disruption of reader expectations in terms, maybe of the heroines and also, perhaps drawing us back to the terrain of borders, sites, in some countries of conflict and contestation.
- These first pages look forward to the end of the story, but at this stage, the prolepsis is a riddle. We cannot make any sense of a woman hiccupping and practising for death.
- There is a lot of **mysterious talk about borders** – internal?, geographical?
- The prolepsis gives a kind of **circular shape** to the tale.

- 
- In chapter two we are met with more frankly **non-realistic propositions** – not only do old ladies practise hiccupping so that they can die elegantly, but Shree slides us further into fantasy and magic – the eighty-year-old woman has every chance of slipping through the wall of her bedroom.
 - We are on the land of the **child's adventure story** and we are in the **poetic land of allegory and symbol** – following the imagery of borders, we now have portals, doors; openings between one world and another:
 - Inside-outside
 - Age-youth
 - Death-life
 - India-Pakistan
 - Realism-fantasy

- In these early chapters, **the wall** represents a barrier or border that Ma must, somehow, by magic, pass through so that new life is released in her and she is freed from the grief of having lost her husband.
- There is also, significantly, talk about **how places travel with people**, after they leave; this points forward to the epic quest journey that Ma will undertake, but it is also, poetically, suggesting that identity is tied up with place and that no matter where you go, the foundational places are within you – for good and bad.

- The **mother-daughter relationship** in the novel is crucially important. Beti, the daughter, 'liberated' through her conspiring mother.
- And, for balance, the **destructive effects** of mother/son/daughter/father love are suggested in Bk I, ch 9.

Shakkapara: crunchy, flaky and fried flour cookies coated with crystallized sugar.

Mathri: traditional Punjabi style mathri which is flaky (khasta in Hindi) and flavored with carom seeds (ajwain), black peppercorns, dry fenugreek leaves (kasuri methi) and cumin seeds.

Batti Chokha: made using wheat flour, black gram flour and potato.



Mathri



Shakkapara



Batti Chokha

KARONDA -
CEANOTHUS
THYRSIFLORUS



METAFICTIONALITY

- In Bk I Ch 10, the narrator **'breaks the spell'**, **suspends disbelief**, rather in the manner of the narrator in Flann O'Brien's *At-Swim-Two-Birds*.
- He/she acknowledges and even celebrates the **promethean capacity of story to go in myriad directions**. The temptation towards **digression**, towards opening up another story, is hard to resist.
- On an aesthetic level (poetics), there is a **yearning for proliferation**, for multiple stories, for the joy of storying itself and a tacit recognition that too many stories will render the story meaningless.
- This could be seen as the **tension between limitlessness and limitation**.
- In postmodern terms it is a plea for **life as 'incorrigibly plural'** (Louis MacNeice).
- At a political level, it is a **recognition of borders** and an act of **resistance** to them.
- Much later, in Bk 3, the unstoppable nature of stories is affirmed as a kind of Resistance, a testimony to how we can be **reborn to joy, to sadness**.

GENDER RELATIONS

- At different points in the novel, **gender roles** are the focus. The tone tends to be **playful**, mockery rather than savage indignation.
- So in Bk I, ch 11, we are told that the male tradition of yelling is handed down, part of male mastery.

CONTRASTING MOODS AND STYLES AND GENRES

- A feature often associated with the experimental novel, but appearing also within the genre of **'magic realism'** common, it seems, in South America and India, is a great **variety of moods, registers and styles**.
- One example of this is after the gentle satire on shouting eldest sons, we have a passage of Dickensian **magic realism** where the chrysanthemums in Bade's garden, spring into life, anthropomorphically.
- Later, we have examples of **fable or parable**, e.g. the tale of the serious son who cannot laugh, which is 'cut' with a satire on consumerist ugliness (viewed through the son's eyes) (Bk I, ch 18, p.80).



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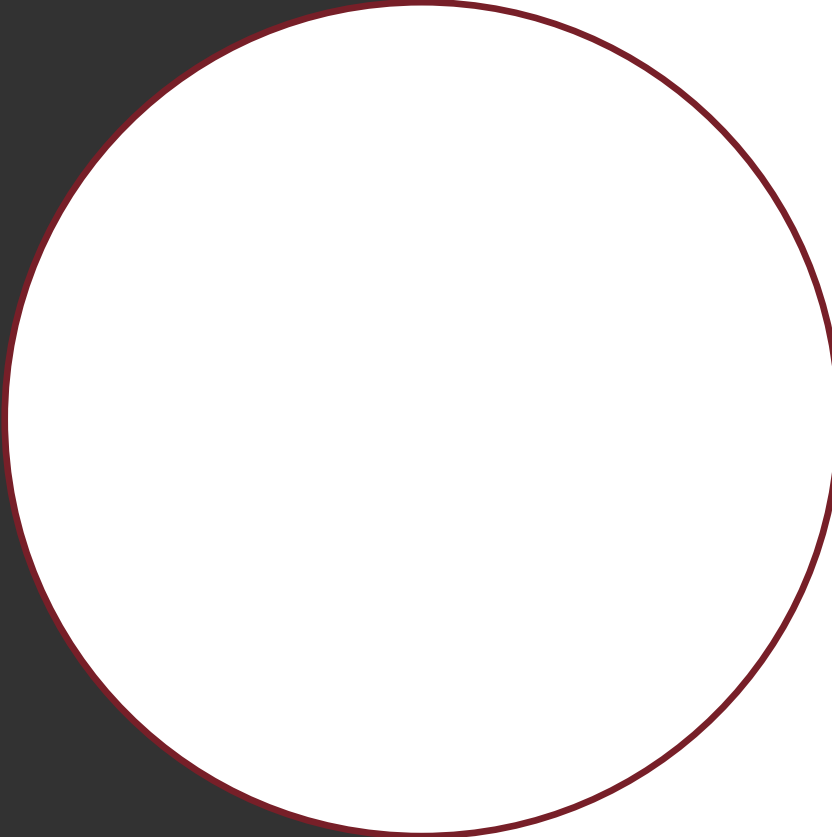
- This spry vignette is followed by a **passage of great tenderness** as we view Bade, through the eyes of Beti, sitting alone, as his father had, half turned towards the chrysanthemums.
- Though the brother and sister do not speak now, the cause of the quarrel is long forgotten and the bitterness has gone, they are **united in their concern for Ma**, who will not come out of her room (Bk I, ch I I, pp-48-49).

POINTS OF VIEW – MULTIPLE PERSPECTIVES

- And as an insight into the subtle construction of the novel, immediately after, we see Beti through Bade's eyes. He pities her lonely life.
- Widening out **from sibling perspectives, to the whole family**. She is, we learn in ch 15, incomprehensible to her family who see her as a poor thing.
- Nonetheless, when Beti begins to get invitations to parties at Rashtrapati Bhavan, she rises in her family's esteem.

PRESIDENTIAL
PALACE, DELHI,
FORMER RESIDENCE
OF THE VICEROY,
DESIGNED BY
EDWARD LANDSEER
LUTYEN, 1912-1929



- 
- And we have **irony** also – Beti's early defiance, her repudiation of convention, is now mirrored in her mother's repeated 'no'.
 - And this **role reversal** is to have great consequence later in the novel.

RUSSIAN DOLLS?

- Another aspect of the metafictionality of the novel is the implication that behind the narrator, self-consciously alerting us that she/he is there, bearing witness, there are hints that this **narrator is questioning herself or that there is a narrator behind this narrator**.
- This a little like the construction in *At Swim-Two-Birds*, or the recessed perspectives in O'Brien's *The Third Policeman* (mathematically speaking, Zeno's paradox – the theory of infinite recession).
- But the effect here is, like *At Swim* – an aspect of the **playfulness** of the book, rather than a metaphor for a fragmented lost self, which is the situation in the more postmodernist *Third Policeman*.
- The **story can even get stuck** (Bk I, ch 18). The narrator exhorts the reader to consider story through a range of 'characters' including a series of animals and natural features like trees and stones.

TRADITIONAL AND MODERN

- A little later, in ch 17 we have a description of Baha, Bade's wife, which manages to **conflate the sardonic with the empathic**.
- And there is **mockery and seriousness** both in the Serious Son's 'traditional' exhortation to his mother to stamp out the door. He is, explicitly, fictive, like a character from a child's story,
- Again, we have hints of **Flann O'Brien** in his avatar as Myles na Gopalleen, mocking the 'traditions' of the men of the Gaeltacht, all performing the same, entropic rites, generation after generation.

STATUS OF NARRATOR

- The **narrator** here is unlike the characterization of the 'author' by Stephen Dedalus in Joyce's *A Portrait of the Artist as a Young Man*, god like. or the cry for freedom heard in Pirandello's *Six Characters in Search of an Author*, or even the tricky combination in Flann O'Brien's *At Swim-Two-Birds*, where author-narrators are frequently parodied and mocked, while characters are sympathetically depicted in their bid for freedom.
- The **narrator continually denigrates her/his importance**, arguing that the function of the narrator, even as a character, is only to be a prop, a functionary who operates a device and charged with one line.
- But the reader is aware that this subaltern is, albeit accidentally, the spring for liberating Ma from her grief.

- The most significant of these is probably the dinner for Bade's retirement from his job as a government official.
- Shree's approach here is to **swerve from the conventional handling in Western literature** (e.g., Christmas dinner in *A Portrait*, Netherfield Ball in *Pride and Prejudice*, the political dinner in *Middlemarch*). And perhaps, **also from the conventions of Bollywood 'finales'**.
- Here, we are told, the 'star' is the sun – causing all the splendor and fireworks – the **orchestra of the sun, nature is hyper-animated** (Bk I, ch 20, p.103).
- But, we may note a staple of such set pieces – the **catalogue technique**. Often, this is deployed to evoke a plenum – an array of almost paradisiacal treats (Bk I, ch 20, p.104). Here, one of the uses is satiric, to critique the number of properties owned by a senior retired officer in the Customs Department.

SET PIECES

- One property is in the jungle,' (Bk I, ch 20, p. 103) – we hear **mischievous undertones** of Kipling's *Jungle Book*, as well as the children's story of Goldilocks.
- But there is **also joy, even ecstasy**.

SET PIECES

POLITICAL PATRONAGE AND PRIVILEGE

- We get an insight into the **elaborate familial, tribal, caste system**, especially relating to the Holy Grail of a government job (Bk I, ch20, pp.106-110).
- We have a further, more sympathetic account of this in Bk I, ch 27. Note very long sentences – expressing the **elaborate nature of the nexus of gratitude and debt**.
- Later, there is a **satire on class, obsession of the educated**. (Bk I, ch 35).
- This may seem very ‘foreign’ but is it really much different from the ‘networks’ which operate in the west?

ON 'FOREIGNERS' – EMPIRES WRITING BACK

- And talking of **foreigners**: the **legacy of colonialism**, in relation to museums is referenced in Bk I, ch 29. The tone is mordant (Bk I, ch 29, p.164).
- And **foreigners**, especially Englishmen are critiques for always having to be the centre of attention.

'A STATE OF CHASSIS' – AUTHORIAL COMMENTARY

- **Authorial commentary** is, of course, another way of suspending disbelief common in nineteenth century western novels.
- The commentary is perhaps somewhat **tongue in cheek**, perhaps, especially after the critique of privilege and fixed societies, but relates also, specifically, to climate change and a kind of Hamletian disorder (Bk I, ch 23, pp. 121-123).

A LITTLE TENDERNESS

- Lovely portrait of Ma's **infectiously playful grandson, Sid**, foil to **Serious Brother/Overseas brother**.
- **We often have gemination – two brothers who pursue opposite paths** in south Asian fiction.
- After the party we get a glimpse of **Sid's innate good-heartedness** (Bk I, ch 24, p. 140).
- Is Sid an artist analogue?



METAFICTION AND PLOT

- Two good examples of how Shree combines the **metafictional dimension** of the novel with delivering **plot shocks** is when in Bk I, Ch 29, p.165, Ma's Buddha goes missing.
- And, in ch 31, a sentence must be left unfinished as a signal of how flabbergasted all are when the hijira, Rosie Bua, appears (p.171).

Hijra – The ‘third sex’ transgender people in southeast Asia. Rosie/Raza as a border crosser, ‘fishgirl in borderhomeland’ (bk 2, p.462).



Hijrah - The emigration/migration of the prophet Muhammad from Mecca to Medina, beginning of Muslim era, 622CE.

RENAISSANCE – A TIME OF BLISS

- Bk 2 is very **gentle in its pace**. Ma recovers, and indeed, embarks on a wonderful time of **tenderness and bliss** – she is like a child, and Beti becomes her mother. But Beti ends up in the spare room!
- This new atmosphere liberates Shree to focus on **the sensory and sensuous**; as Ma's senses reawaken, so do ours (Bk 2, p.267).
- Yet , all is not perfect and Beti and Rosie are at odds at times. Rosie's presence is big (Bk 2, p.335).
- We also have a **take-off into fantasy**, as we meet a conclave of talking crows (Bk 2, ch 45, p.385).
- But the crows also enable Shree to **offer the reader a different point of view**, especially on Bade.They are to reappear later.
- Ma has a fall, then a cyst, which is penis like – again the theme of **gender border dissolution**.

ECOFICTION

- The **ecolove** of the book is present in the wonderful vividness with which the natural world is depicted – often rising into a kind of **hyperreal animation**.
- But what of nature destroyed? While Serious Brother sees pollution, the most stark depiction of **despoilment** is in Bk 2 where Beti and Ma stand at the edge of a poisoned lake. They are hunting for Rosie, but we find out that the lake is a land of prolepsis for other kinds of pollution – the couple to whom she rents her bungalow kill her. While Ma falls and recovers, when Rosie fell she died. Another **plot shocker** (Ch 73, 74). And the lake bursts into flames – **demonic magic realism**.
- They find Rosie stuffed into a box bed – metaphor for **society's 'hiding' of they who are different, the border crossers**. The police do not want to know, but Shree insists we are shocked by the gruesome detail of her corpse.
- Near the end of the novel, Ma delivers a diatribe about the polluted present, a border running with blood (Bk 3, Ch 22, p.656). In defiance, she dances nine ragas (classical Indian melodic form, word denoting passion in front of the guards).

- Ma deeply affected, she grows smaller and smaller. The blackbirds are in sympathy. Beti now has a renaissance, a new birth – she too has crossed a new set of borders. ‘a soft velvety sunshine, spreading a shawl over ma to protect her’. Her desire for her boyfriend is rekindled.
- Ma begins to whistle as if she were not in the bustling home of a prosperous city, but in the wilderness, in a desert, where a whistle echoes in the void and slowly dies away (Bk 2, ch 79, p525). This **plangent elegy**, almost breaking Bade’s heart, is also proleptic.
- Towards the end of Bk 2, ma asks for a passport, to go to Pakistan, to deliver the chirongi (almond like nut for sweetening dishes) to someone on Rosie’s behalf. But there are hints that this coming quest is also a Samadhi, a **manifestation of meditative consciousness**.

BORDERS ABOUNDING

- It is fitting that the final Book carries forward the overtures sounded in opening presages of the novel. As they travel towards the border with Pakistan, the narrator asks if every story is really a Partition tale. We have the **almost medieval device of the tableau vivant** as the Partition writers appear at the border, reciting, acting their parts, in defiance of the border. But literature is mixed with violence and mirth (Ch 1, p.540).
- As Ma and Beti journey into Pakistan, the **nature of the quest deepens**, becomes even more riddling. She finds Rosie's maternal home and lets down the pins from her hair (repeating that gesture of Rosie's), an ancient man places his hand on hers and the people gather (ch 7).

BORDERS ABOUNDING

- We have another **plot shocker** – Ma is returning home and the scenes of her young life before she marries her first husband, Anwar.
- Then, we have **four stories within the story**, which tell of how her life in Pakistan was catastrophically torn apart. We are back at the time of partition, riots and killing; people broken up, broken apart.
- Ma escapes, taking the little Buddha, seeing it as a sign from Anwar. But they must endure the most terrible of captures, taken captive into Thar. The terror of the young women is evoked through an **eerie lyricism** (Ch 13, p.615).
- It is on this terrible journey that Ma meets Rosie and rescues her, only to lose her.

KHYBER PASS IN KPK, PAKISTAN



- Ma and Beti fetch up in Khyber, and this too, is part of Ma's query, perhaps the deepest retrieval of all.
- **Ma defies the idea of borders** and challenges the person in charge, Anwar, who tells her, as she riddles him, this is not a game. Ma gives him a well-served, magisterial answer (Bk 3, ch 23, p.661).
- And then, the **final reveal**, this Anwar is her own son. She succeeds in escaping with Beti to visit his father, her first husband. The crow is mightily impressed by the scene (p.663).
- That crow and his friend, the partridge, must bear witness to the **inexorable denouement**.
- But that, is **another story**... which you may read for yourselves.

SOURCES OF IMAGES

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