



Reading women, translating cultures

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Tomb of Sand

By Geetanjali Shree; translated by Daisy Rockwell

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PRAVINA COOPER

With *Tomb of Sand* (*Ret Samadhi*, 2018), Geetanjali Shree creates history in becoming the first Hindi novelist to be presented with the International Booker Prize this year. Fellow Indian-born Booker laureates include VS Naipaul, Salman Rushdie, Kiran Desai, Arundhati Roy and Aravind Adiga.

Given the recent “regional turn” in Indian writing, a rich array of works in translation have been made available in recent years to readers at home and abroad. Perumal Murugan’s Tamil *Poonachi* (2016), S Hareesh’s Malayalam novel *Moustache* (2020), Vivek Shanbhag’s Kannada novel *Ghachar Ghochar* (2015), and the Bengali *Shameless* (2020) by Taslima Nasreen have received critical acclaim. Whereas Indian writing in English tends to speak for the metropolitan middle class, translated works bring a rich rootedness in local and indigenous cultures.

Daisy Rockwell, the translator of *Tomb of Sand*, who shares the Booker Prize with Geetanjali Shree has published numerous translations from Hindi and Urdu, including selected stories by Upendranath Ashk’s *Falling Walls* (2015), Bisham Sahni’s *Tamas* (2016), and Khadija Mastur’s *The Women’s Courtyard* (2018) and Krishna Sobti’s final novel, *A Gujarat Here, A Gujarat There* (2019). Her win of the Booker Prize for translation has revived debates around the craft of translation.

Tomb of Sand is the story of the aging Ma who crosses the proverbial *lakshman rekha* of dutiful conventions. Rejecting her role as generational mascot of the past, the recently-widowed Ma decides to live life on her own terms. The novel is a feminist fable, a political tract on Partition, a scathing satire of upwardly mobile middle-class Indians, particularly the joint family. It is above all about crossing literal and metaphoric borders — borders of gender, of reality and imagination and arbitrary borders of nations. Told in a fabulist style, the novel’s strengths are many: its linguistic showmanship and its brilliant comedic powers. Comedy writing, underrated in the Indian canon, has come unto its own in Shree’s work.

The novel is also the story of the Indian joint family — seen by Shree as a microcosm of the larger community, even of the nation. In addition to the 80-year-old Ma, the token matriarch, the cast of characters includes her son Bade, a retired government officer, her daughter Beti, a successful writer and a

feminist; two grandsons, Siddharth and ‘Overseas Son’ and daughter-in-law, Bahu. The plot gets triggered when one day the recently widowed Ma, at the age of 80 “turns selfish”. Turning her back on everyone, she refuses to eat or participate in any way. She moves in with Beti rather than with the conventional choice Bade, her son. At Beti’s, Ma rediscovers herself. Here, finally at peace, Ma forges a friendship with the transgender Rosie (also known as Raza Tailor Master). Eventually, Ma decides to slip west across the border into Pakistan, her childhood home. Ma has crossed all boundaries and come full circle.

Shree is a startlingly bold writer whose satire of the “everyday battles”

Eros and vitality have been vanquished. In a stunning sentence, Shree describes Beti, who is eager to work as someone who “when she lifts her pen, the bangles on her wrists jangle” (p 46). The slap to patriarchy can be heard loud and clear. It is this ability to literalise metaphors, and to provide gems of philosophical insight that distinguishes Shree’s work.

Women particularly, bear the brunt in the joint family. “Shouting” we are told has been “handed down from father to son” (p 46). Women disappear amongst household artefacts and tradition. Ma writes, “Everyone set about folding her up, smoothing her wrinkles as though she were a piece of fabric” (p 228) and again, “she’s being turned into pakoras. Moistened,

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within family life in mock epic style is scathing. Suffocating each other like boa constrictors “till everyone is out of breath” (p 40), Bade, Bahu, Beti, Serious Son live out their inconsequential lives. The novel is a brilliant excoriation of the hypocrisies codified in the joint family. Contradictions abound. Bade the patriarch, who mouths moralistic pieties, is driven by an upwardly mobile consumerist economy. Beti, despite being a feminist and a professional writer has lost her identity. Describing her face the narrator tells us, “her outline has been erased” (p 429). Orderly management and daily proceedings of the household have managed to erase her libido (p 428).

ground, grated, cut into pieces, reclining n boiling oil eek eek flip flop sliding into bellies and disintegrating (p 60)”. Ma’s words evoke another unseen woman nearly a century ago —Virginia Woolf’s Clarissa Dalloway who realised that she had become invisible. Women’s invisibility is an important trope in the book. Shree is particularly sharp in her feminist critique and the uncrowning of the husband/father figure.

The veneer of respectability that accompanies a certain middle-class patriarchy goes hand in hand with a culture based on consumerist greed. The deadened souls and the frivolity of lives lived within come in for a particularly blistering attack. The Reebok clan, to

which Bahu belongs, has grown so large we are told, that, “It has beaten the Sikhs, the Gujaratis, and the Chinese, all of whom like to boast that they have reached all corners of the world.” (p 65) Tired of the deadening enmeshment in her joint family, “exhausted after years of subsuming her own rhythm to that of others”, Ma decides to bail — bail as mother, as wife, as widow. Like Oskar in Gunter Grass’s *Tin Drum* (1959), who refuses to grow up, like the Baron in Italo Calvino’s *Baron in the Trees* (1957) who refuses to descend from the trees, like Lysistrata in 5th-century Athens who refuses to have sex until the war is stopped, refusal becomes Ma’s primary tool. “Get up. No. Sunshine. No. Soup. No. No eating, no drinking, not even touching tea...” (p 25) She will refuse to be swallowed by this python of domesticity.

The novel could be read as an allegory of the post-colonial condition or a feminist tract, but to do so would be to miss many of the nuances and stylistics of it. Like Lawrence Sterne’s *Tristram Shandy*, Shree’s novel is a metafictional work and like Dante’s *Divine Comedy*, a commentary on mankind albeit studded with Rabelasian humour. We are introduced early on to the peculiarity of the novel: the Story itself as character. “Here’s the thing: a story can fly, stop, go, turn, be whatever it wants to be.” (p 83) Avoiding the tedium and a banality of the characters’ lives, the novel abandons the sub-plots and digresses: it is in these digressions that can be found some of Shree’s most brilliant reflections. Where was Rosie prior to her set-up with Ma? What exactly happened to Anwar whom Ma talks about in Pakistan? There is a marked lack of interest in worldly affairs as the Story arrogantly ups and leaves.

This is also a profoundly philosophical novel. The reader is taken into an Alice in Wonderland world where non-human things such as snakes, crows, canes with rainbow-coloured butterflies that fly off, the doors and walls, provide occasions of philosophical reflection. The structure of the natural world gets top billing. While the well-read Bade with the “jalebi brain” is unable to comprehend the “sorrowful raga of the leaves” (p 368), an elderly crowess urges her children: “Soften...observe from your heart; not with unkindness why does absolutely everything incite you to violence?” (p 381)

Tomb of Sand is a profoundly comic novel. A comic novel with a serious purpose. With this novel, Geetanjali Shree takes her place as one of the few Indian comedy writers along with GV Desani, Kiran Nagarkar, Mukul Kesavan, I Alan Sealy and Upamanyu Chatterjee. Shree’s comedy lies in the tradition of Menippean satire, a genre which attacks mental attitudes rather than specific individuals. Through its parodic style it often comments on society, on subjects such as self-knowledge and self-deception. The carnivalisation of humans and their history and the sheer ebullience and vivacity with which she does it, makes it one of the more stylish novels in recent times.

Language intoxicates and dazzles in Shree’s work. Intermingling English with Hindustani, academic discussion with Sufi proverbs, refrains of popular songs with fables, Shree cannibalises different registers remarkably. Words

like musical notes take off into semantic flights revelling in their own incantation and the magicality of their own acoustics. “Lord Rama ram- bles...” (p 132) and “Anglos angle”. By playing with language, Shree calls attention to the fact that the relationship between language and truth is not a transparent one. Because meaning is almost always obscured by those who have the authority to manipulate it, Shree turns language into a playground of meaningless babble. This is the reason why Ma speaks in tongues. With language playing a rock-star role in Shree’s novel, it is no surprise that Daisy Rockwell’s translation has come in for so much attention.

The Romantic conceptualisation of the ‘original’ and ‘originary’ has had a strong influence on the construction of translation as a form of ‘imitation’. Words such as ‘betrayal’ and ‘infidelity’ conveyed a whole host of negative connotations used in the field to denote a ‘secondariness’, even ‘loss’ in translation. For scholars in the field of Translation Studies, there has been much debate today in de-sanctifying this idea of the ‘original’. Today the inevitability of translation as being partial and subjective is accepted as the saying goes, “Traduire, c’est trahir” (to translate is to betray). Walter Benjamin in his famous essay “Task of the Translator”² sees both the writer and the translator as working cooperatively to express something that exists outside of the realm of any one language. A translation in this sense is less an attempted resuscitation of the original, and more an intersection of textual surfaces within the target language to recreate the sense of the original. In addition, Lawrence Venuti has pointed to the ‘violence’ and power asymmetry that is at the heart of acts of translation, because it is “the reconstitution of the foreign text in accordance with values, beliefs, and representations that preexist it in the target language”³.

For a novel as linguistically playful, and as deeply idiomatic as Shree’s novel, it is to Rockwell’s credit that she produces a translation faithful to the original yet lively enough that it reads fluidly in English. In her Translator’s Note, Rockwell has written:

I have striven throughout my translation to recreate the text as an English *dhvani* of the Hindi, seeking out wordplays, echoes, etymologies, and coinages that feel Hindi-esque. (p 36)

She translates material and social culture and customs often retaining many Hindi words and phrases. Kinship terms, such as Mataji, Amma, elderly Dadi, Behenji, are left untranslated. Others such as aarti, puja, baksheesh, food items such as jalebi, Rooh Afza render the text culturally “other” and retain the flavour of Indian culture. In justifying these choices, Rockwell in her Translator’s Note has pointed to the fact that the original *Ret Samadhi* has words in English too. Words such as ‘Last Supper’, ‘Reeboks’ etc, not to mention a myriad references to Western cultural icons such as Wittgenstein, Borges, and Annie Montaud which saturate the original in Hindi. This suggests not only the multi-lingual world that Indians inhabit to begin with, but that languages in a global context must of necessity be hybrid.

For a novel as linguistically playful, and as deeply idiomatic as Shree’s novel, it is to Rockwell’s credit that she produces a translation faithful to the original yet lively enough that it reads fluidly in English. One of the main reasons she succeeds is because she captures the narrator’s racing thoughts and comic voice. The novel remains primarily an auditory experience rather than a reading one. A typical paragraph in Shree’s novel starts in this chatty way: “So it’s like this, let’s expand upon the topic of the elderly missing mother.” The monologues told in a stream-of-consciousness style affirm the presence of the speaker and listener — not of the reader. Like the other rebel Molly Bloom in James Joyce’s *Ulysses* who similarly exudes eros, vitality and exuberance, Shree’s narrator seduces the reader into a gossipy world of intimate revelations. It is this ‘voice’, its garrulous orality and the tempo and rhythm of spoken speech that Rockwell captures so well

Privileging readability over fidelity, Rockwell has taken several liberties with the translation and a few Americanised words like ‘dude’, and ‘chill’ feel startlingly out of place, but manage to convey the ‘tone’ or ‘climate’ of the original. In a few places, Rockwell’s phrases do not carry over the meaning entirely. “Ghar wapasi”, a phrase full of political connotations, of conversion from Islam to Hinduism is translated simply as “Mission Return Home” (p 169). “Gaya bhi gaya” gets translated as: “Gaya is also gone — for where the remains of that famous seat of learning, the city which was once Gaya.” (p 167) While the punning is lost in “Gaya is gone”, Rockwell fills out the gaps for the English reader in a gloss (ie, the famous seat of learning).

The real challenge for Rockwell she admits in her Translator’s Note was to translate what she calls Shree’s “linguicity”: a writing which uses onomatopoeic, nonsensical, or invented words. And here Rockwell’s successes are many. Ma’s firm refusal to get up, “Ab to main nahin uthongi. Abb to main naiuthongi. Abb to main naiiunthongi, Ab main nayiuthongi. Ab to main nayi hi uthongi” is translated as: “Nooooooo, I won’t rise nowwww. Nooo rising nyooww. Nyooriisenyooww. Now rise new. Now, I’ll rise anew.” (p 21) While the quality of persistence and musicality of “nahin uthongi” is lost in “I won’t”, the slippage from “no” to “new” is well done. She keeps as many of the text’s rhythmic cadences of the original text intact.

Despite some of the translational losses, one of the main reasons that Rockwell succeeds so well is because she captures the narrator’s racing thoughts and comic voice. The novel remains primarily an auditory experience rather than a reading one. A typical paragraph in Shree’s novel starts in this chatty way: “So it’s like this, let’s expand upon the topic of the elderly missing mother.” (p 172) The monologues told in a stream-of-consciousness style affirm the presence of the speaker and listener not the presence of the reader. Like Molly Bloom, the other rebel from James Joyce’s *Ulysses* who similarly exudes eros, vitality and exuberance, Shree’s narrator seduces the reader into

a gossipy world of intimate revelations. It is this ‘voice’, its garrulous orality and the tempo and rhythm of spoken speech that Rockwell captures so well in her translation.

Finally, the novel is primarily about fictional stories we live by, redemptive fictions, female fictions, marriage fictions, national fictions. Stories are everywhere — they go into samadhi (entombing themselves), are stirred, and re-emerge. Towards the end of the novel, fiction and reality meet in a ghostly encounter at the border where fictional writers, Khushwant Singh, Saadat Manto and others rise from the grave to discuss Partition with the soldiers. Official history too is seen to be just another story.

In giving us Ma, Shree has given us a woman who richly engages with life. Underlying the satire, is an affectionate vision: one of hope for human being’s proliferating possibilities. In capturing the energies of carnival laughter (of all unitary categories and identities) Shree also gives us a gloriously expansive world. Her linguistic flamboyance showcases India’s cultural and emotional density. Both the novel and Daisy Rockwell’s translation of it are a paean to the rich multi-cultural world that is India. On the partnership of author and translator, Rockwell has said in an interview following the awarding of the International Booker Prize:

Lately, I like to think of the translator and the author as ballroom dancers. The author is Fred Astaire, and the translator is Ginger Rogers. The translator must follow the author’s lead, but do everything backwards in high heels.⁴

Tomb of Stone was indeed a virtuoso performance.

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NEW ARRIVALS

Ret Samadhi - Hindi

Geetanjali Shree

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Tomb of Sand Geetanjali Shree WINNER OF THE INTERNATIONAL BOOKER PRIZE 2022 Winner of an English Pen Award In northern India, an eighty-year-old woman slips into a deep depression after the death of her husband, and then resurfaces to gain a new lease on life. Her determination to fly in the face of convention – including striking up a friendship with a transgender person – confuses her bohemian daughter, who is used to thinking of herself as the more ‘modern’ of the two. To her family’s consternation, Ma insists on travelling to Pakistan, simultaneously confronting the unresolved trauma of her teenage experiences of Partition, and re-evaluating what it means to be a mother, a daughter, a woman, a feminist. Rather than respond to tragedy with seriousness, Geetanjali Shree’s playful tone and exuberant wordplay results in a book that is engaging, funny, and utterly original, at the same time as being an urgent and timely protest against the destructive impact of borders and boundaries, whether between religions, countries, or genders.

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In *The Language of Remembering*, as a natural progression, explores that very notion as it reveals how Partition is not yet an event of the past and its legacy is threaded into the daily lives of subsequent generations. Bringing together conversations recorded over many years with generations of Indians, Pakistanis, Bangladeshis and their respective diaspora, it looks at how Partition memory is preserved and bequeathed, its consequences disseminated and manifested within family, community and nation. With the oldest interviewees in their nineties and the youngest just teenagers, the voices in this living archive intimately and sincerely answer questions such as: Is Partition relevant? Should we still talk about it? Does it define our relationships? Does it build our characteristics or augment our fears, without us even realizing?

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