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Research Article



## Ret Samadhi: Booker Award and Dialectics of South Asian Literature

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### Abstract

Gitanjali Shree, now seen in the elite group of Booker winners, basically a teacher of English and social studies, has solicited a coveted recognition for herself with her brilliant writing skill in Hindi. Indian academics and literary sphere owe a rich tradition of such all-round competence of certain eminent personalities who having a commanding deft in their professional discipline flaunts an equal skill in a discipline of a different language. Many a shining name like Firaq Gorakhpuri, Harivansh Rai Bachchan, Ram Villas Sharma, Madhav

Kaushik, Anamika, Ashok Vajpayee and lastly, but not the least, to mention the name of Gitanjali Shree is a strong testimony that Indian intelligentsia is multidisciplinary. In the current monograph the author intends to analyze certain features in the dialectics of South Asian literature in Gitanjali Shree's Booker Award winning work of *Ret Samadhi, Tomb of Sand*. One sole purpose of this investigation is to ascertain accuracy in her portrayal of Indian society in 21<sup>st</sup> century. If this portrayal conforms to the tradition of early Booker winner writers like Rushdi, Naipaul, Adiga, Desai and Roy or it has modulated the depiction of South Asian society with a distinguished prying into it. One of the arch constituents of South Asian dialectics is a vivid sketch of society with all its chores and an imitative representation of the entire zeitgeist. From this perspective how well, the authoress has succeeded in foregrounding the apparent and subterranean reality has to be weighed in this paper. There is an easily perceptible thread of commonality in almost all Indian Booker winner writers that is to expose even the hidden vulnerabilities of Indian society and to ignore even the most conspicuous beauties of it. Is Gitanjali also treading on the same path or she has her own trajectory with some distinction is another intent of this research paper.

**Keywords:** South Asia, Culture, Society, Booker award, Dialectics, Cosmopolitanism, Cross border, Feminism, Discourse

South Asian dialectics have carved a niche in the multiplicity of discourses, put forth by innumerable writers all across the globe. South Asian writers have not only resisted the incessant flow of stereotypes pushed ahead by writers in the West, but also, they have rendered an alternative perspective of the society, people, nation and culture of this subcontinent. One of the arch reasons why these writers have suddenly become a cynosure in the world academics is their distinguished narrative not only in content but in style also. In content they have foregrounded stories with new twist and turn, of new pattern and of displaying a rather intricate kind of human relationship in this part of the world. South Asian literature veers around the axis of socio-political, cultural, religious and philosophical domain. Gautam Karmakar frames a socio-literary topography of South Asian literature and asserts, "The South Asian literature is rich with its cultural multiplicity, historical complications, colonial legacy and disowning the legacy, indigenous groups environmental diversity and diasporic global entanglement. All these have interested numerous scholars, historians, sociologists and ethnographers around the world to explicate South Asian socio-culture and complexities manifested in the livelihood of inhabitants of South Asia" (Preface, I).

Writers from South Asian region have a natural predilection as well as a missionary determination to voice their opinion, to portray their perspicacity of their own land and to resist with an aim of encountering tangential depiction of West regarding their land. South Asian literature highlights the socio-cultural issues, history, demands, problems, challenges of the vast region called South Asia. It also gradually makes people aware of the South Asian cultural plurality and diversity and of the fact that “the division of Orient and Occident is mere fantasy and a political strategy of the West to continue the colonial enterprise” (Karmakar, XX). Writers of South Asia, either in English or in regional languages, translated in English, have indulged very deep in the thematic examination of various aspects of life, peculiar to South Asia. Many writers, like Khaled Hosseini, Bapsi Sidhwa, Zulfikar Ghose, Taslima Nasreem, Tariq Ali, Michael Ondaatje, Shehan Karunatilaka, Aravind Adiga, Kiran Desai, Amitav Ghosh, Tehmina Anam, Nadia Anjuma, V.S. Naipaul, Anamika, Gitanjali Shree etc. have expressed diasporic sensibilities, patriarchal society, gender and queer issues, politics of border, family system, discrepancy between professed and practiced reality, larger than life values and failures in holding it or recurrent compromises in attempt of proving abiding by those values. Feminist consciousness is a marked quality of South Asian literature because position of women in these societies is not very much satisfactory. Ethically, religiously and ideologically women clan are held in an esteemed position but the fringe elements in the same societies have prescribed an incarceration (imposed moral obligations) around them. Some on the name of *Sharia*, as there are depictions in Hosseini’s *The Kite Runner* and Taslima Nasreem’s *Lajja*, exhibit extreme cruelty, male chauvinism, misogyny and try forced subjugation, domestication and exploitation. Such clan without an iota of reticence, hesitation and conscience crush the very idea of free womanhood and their progress in several domains of society. In countries like Pakistan and Afghanistan, women are allowed very little opportunity to flourish as they are principally guided by the *Sharia* code of conduct, which paradoxically are obeyed or followed too less in Arabian countries. Paul Brians endeavors to encapsulate dialectics of South Asian literature in his book *Modern South Asian Literature in English*;

The world visible through these fictional windows are widely varied. Rohinton Mistry and Bapsi Sidhwa portray the tiny Parsi community, Khushwant Singh portrays the Sikh community, and others concentrate on the dominant Muslim, Hindu and (in Sri Lanka) Buddhist Cultures. We meet street urchins, gangsters, prostitutes, peasants, small merchants, wealthy industrialists and saints. Writers create satire, humor, tragedy, social criticism and romance. Some write in experimental styles that require careful decoding. Others are happy to layout their tales in a traditional fashion that keeps the casual reader

interested. Both men and women write movingly of the lives of South Asia's women and girls. Many write about the world of their childhood, others try to depict contemporary reality, and an increasing number are writing historical novels ranging back a century and more. It would be absurd to refer to the South Asian reality. There is no such thing. South Asian literature is a colourful kaleidoscope of fragmented views, colored by the perceptions of its authors, reflecting myriad realities and fantasies. One of the most inviting ways to overcome the biases in any particular work is to read more. And a growing audience seems eager to do just that. (xxii)

Hanif Kureshi, in one of his anthologies of collected essays related to the very process of writing *Dreaming and Scheming: Reflection on Writings and Politics*, substantiates that writing, particularly by writers of South Asian region, tends to revolve around the writer's insular experiences of his own self, his family, his society and his collective consciousness as a member of Indian subcontinent. He suggests;

Literature is concerned with the self conscious exploration of the lives of men, women and children in society... we work over our lives continuously; our minds generate and invent in night-dreaming, day-dreaming and in fantasy...we live in too many disparate worlds at once- in the solid everyday world, and in the insubstantial, fantastic one at the same time. Imagination and one's wishes are real too. They are part of daily life too and the distinction between the softness of dreams and hard reality can never be made clear. (Kuereshi 281)

Such notion and that too from an international writer of Hanif Kuereshi's stature provides a testimony to the writing of Gitanjali Shree and the conduit flow of her style in narration that allows a frequent switching over to real, imagines, thought and mute bur delivered mutterings inside. Let's now delve deeper in the text to analyze its warp and woof and also the politics of Booker award bestowed to a few Indian writers particularly to those who have been insularly confined to the external visage of Indian society.

Gitanjali Shree's *Ret Samadhi*, or *Tomb of Sand* (as translated in English by Daisy Rockwell) has caught readers with great surprise, in fact with awe and flabbergasting, because of its deft style and linguistic experiments, its verbatim and with a prose style that flows like a stream going through uneven trajectory and consequently being modulated in its pace in accordance with space, characters and imageries that are modern and mythological concurrently. She is first Hindi writer to have grabbed the coveted International Booker Award in literature. She is just second to Late Rabindranath Tagore in bringing such a significant laurel in the field of literature. It is quite surprising that in such a rich body of literature in more than twenty-two official languages of India only two writers have made their way to this height. *Gitanjali* won Nobel prize for literature after being recommended by an Irish, W. B.

Yeats and *Ret Samadhi* has won international booker award after it was translated by an American. Besides her, five other Indian writers who have written in English have received Booker Award for literature. The former is given to work of fiction written in any language but translated in English while later is given to works purely written in English. The excitement and jubilation caused by the award is, understandably, in direct proportion to how seldom the West casts on us an eye of kindness, if not condescending, approbation. The award to it is undeniably cannot be without any schematic considerations. *Tomb of Sand* is said to be the first Hindi novel and even more first novel from any Indian language to have won this prize. By implication this also honours to the extensive mass of Hindi literature behind this much one lucky book, albeit belated. It also raises a very crucial question, unanswered from decades, if there has been no precedent literary work in Indian Hindi literature or that written in other official languages that could have made its way to this acclaim and recognition. Actually, to determine yardsticks for this award is challenging enough that it cannot be laid down easily. But strong assumptions have been always formulated by critics and writers. One such formulation is that the committee for award even does not consider the big bulk of much better works being produced in other official languages of India and world. Translations of this rich legacy by translators other than the UK or Ireland or US, a prerequisite condition for the International Booker Award, are not mulled for the Booker Award. Thus Premchand, Amrit Lal Nagar, Manu Bhandari, Kamleshwar, Anamika, Mridula Garg, could not reach to sponsored British and Irish translations and could never be honored with such esteemed recognition. Another equally important formulation has been there wherein it has been voiced that Booker committee awards writers who portray a biased picture of Indian society by presenting only external and superficial facet on Indian society and culture. All Booker winners like Naipaul, Rushdie, Desai, Adiga and Roy have done so and their writing have impressed Western readers because their writings tend to perpetuate stereotypes that hold the Orient in stark contrast with occident. "Their projection of Indian culture is incomplete and partial. Their writings have won international accolade but the content and subject matter of their books have to be weighed cautiously. To be weighed not for outright rejection but to fill up the blanks and to add what is left by these diasporic writers" (Rai, 24). Gitanjali Shree bears no exception and can't be spared from this art of criticism. Even Prof Harish Trivedi voices and stamps on such not implausible inklings in his article, "Looking at our Literature Beyond One Lucky Booker";

the Indo-Anglian winners of the older Booker, such as Rushdie, Roy, Naipaul and Adiga were often charged with writing for a western readership. But some Indian language writers too now display a cosmopolitan sensibility, which may for some of them have become a

desirable global sensibility in a world of border crossings. (*Times of India* on 31<sup>st</sup> May, 2022)

Gitanjali's own assertion in this regard is worth mentioning;

"This is not just about me, the individual. I represent a language and culture and this recognition brings into larger purview the entire world of Hindi literature in particular and Indian literature as a whole. It also brings into view the fact that there is a vast world of literature with rich lineages which still needs to be discovered, I am pleased and humbled to be the conduit for this" ([www.thebookerprize.com](http://www.thebookerprize.com)).

While recognizing her book and applauding it for Booker Prize, the chief jury of Booker Committee, Frank Wynne adjudges, "This is a luminous novel of India and partition but one whose spell binding brio and fierce compassion, weaves youth and age, male and female, family and nation into a kaleidoscopic whole" ([www.thebookerprize.com](http://www.thebookerprize.com)). Such acknowledgement is an indication in itself that the award is more for its portrayal of Indian society and culture rather than for her distinctive style of writing. Gitanjali Shree herself reveals that the award engenders more exposure to her writings and she feels to be catapulted in the hall of fame. Emphasizing on the significance of Booker recognition Gitanjali herself speaks in an interview, "Even if the Booker focus is on the English translation, it willy-nilly casts a light on all my work in the original and in other language translations" ([www.thebookerprize.com](http://www.thebookerprize.com)).

*Ret Samadhi*, offers an exceedingly complex plot, a plot which can't boast of a proper beginning, a systematic development of the plot and a neat end. There are three distinct themes which are taken up successively in three parts of the novel. It can be well understood if we borrow an image from the novel itself, "A story going to narrate itself. Complete and incomplete in itself, as it is generally the trend of stories" (*Ret Samadhi*, 9). The story flows not as one big stream but rather into three adjacent lakes, each with its own self-sufficiency. In the first part an octogenarian Granny having lost all interest in life has turned her back not only to the entire family but also to every particle of life. She finds the wall by her bedside as her true companion and wishes to be completely submerged with in the wall so that she can't be seen by any of the family member and is with difficulty cajoled by the joint family to take an interest in things again. The novel documents more the zigzag way of human relations within the family and how quickly people change their pattern of bonding with each other. A soft-spoken employed father, liberated and outspoken daughter, serving but always irritated daughter-in-law, a dead husband, some family friends and their living and talking as scattered and asymmetrical as a Panchayat assembly on some very petty issue. Among all these paraphernalia of a middle-class family strong metaphors like "wall" "door" "window"



“borders” clearly reflect the confined and under liberated life of women folk in the conventional patriarchal society of South Asia. Manifesting voices of discontent against such patriarchal arrangement is among one of the major dialectics of South Asian literature besides tales of border, arguing and adjusting family structure, constantly slipping in and out of their own declarations, love, hate, cornering, foregrounding etc. It is for this reason that Ma decides to shift away to Beti’s house from Bade (son’s) house. It is a symbolical shifting from the (in)visible clutches of patriarchy and uncomfortability to the cozy zone of affection, bonding and liberation. Women’s suppression is rooted in the very fabric of South Asian society: in tradition, in religious doctrines and practices, in the educational and legal system and of course within the families. Traditionally it is the women who are supposed to bear the primary responsibility for the wellbeing of their families, yet they are systematically denied the access to the resources they need to fulfill their responsibility. Veena Das indicates, “Voices of freedom, judgement, self-expression and independence are largely denied to millions of South Asian women” (Das, 57). So, it is with the central protagonist of this novel too. Having accomplished all her Motherly duties, she is at the fringe of life in her own family and house. There are all family members and they are seemingly careful for her requirements too but on the real side they are quite apathetic and fail to give her a shelter full of solace and carefree residing. That is why she turns her back to pretentious life in the house and glued to the wall. Gitanjali gives a concrete picture of how tradition has substantiated privilege of patriarchy;

Shouting is traditionally rooted in the family. Shrieking of elder sons is an old custom. As if masterly right. Custom is absolute. One may not be cruel by heart but he has to don the attire of strictness. It is assumed in the family that Bade’s father was more adept in shouting but Bade has not the equal boiling rage. But they have equal pitch of talking. . . . (*Ret Samadhi*, 25)

In the second section with the title ‘Sunlight’ opens a diametrical new world and setting where Chandrabhabha Devi like her own name reveals a soothing moonlit night. Birds begin to chirp, flowers bloom with more radiance and fragrance and the world dons a favorite pink attire, “The sunlight arrived each morning kissing Ma’s face and the two of would sit and gaze at each other together” (Shree, 248). The novel also traces the transformation of Ma, who was just a tomb of sand, toiling for the family till eighty, deciding to fly away like the wishing tree, “gliding into her own arteries and aerosols” (Shree, 56). In fact, travelling with Ma to Pakistan, seeing her zeal, Beti wonders, “When did I become me, and am I me, or have I become Ma?” (Shree, 465). Beti is in awe when she gets to see a Ma, who is totally different from the person that she used to be at home, where “everyone’s breath flowed through her” (Shree, 19). The journey to Pakistan is also a time for introspection for Beti when she actually gets to know Ma

and the realization dawns on her as to how progressive her mother is. Another character Rosy Bua brings a fresh whiff of air and her frequent visit served like a balm to all woes of Ma. Ma's bonding with the transgender Rosie, is viewed suspiciously by her own 'progressive' children, revealing middle-class hypocrisies. As the narration meanders through the traumatic events of partition to the present, the author also sarcastically touches upon all major socio-political issues in India, till date – religious intolerance, communal riots, episodes of lynching by the cow vigilantes, Buddhism, political manipulations, problems of minorities and strong engagement with environmental issues, arising out of massive urbanisation. El Nino appears in a metaphorical extract where the writer skilfully suggests that discussion surrounding their lives are being cawed in a huge assembly of crows;

Time of debates was still in vogue among crows. Unlike human beings none was shot at the slightest deviation from one's perspective. Oldies, with white feathers, young college going crows, male and female, all were engaged in heated debates as if the entire cosmos was turned upside down. In older times without barometer, compass, thermometer, agrometer, Google, twitter we would know that rain was increasing, a wild animal was out for its hunt, wind would not slow down, seven brothers would not be silent, mouse would become lion etc. Now all this predictive ability of us was spoiled and they were happy with their stethoscope, telescope and different varieties of copes. Our children were without proper food. This entire discussion was around El Nino. (182)

She feels herself greatly relieved and makes herself ready to embark on what she has been silently planning within her. A wish to visit Pakistan, a land of her husband, a land of her roots to which she feels herself inextricably attached.

The final section third 'Back to the Front' brings Ma and Beti to the Wagah border and to a number of reminiscences related to partition. The trauma of partition is projected in small intermittent sections appearing and disappearing in quick succession. The conjunction between India and Pakistan, Khyber has been described as an uncertain land where anything can happen without any caution or consequences, "It is Khyber, a connecting chord between two mad countries. Anything can be done here in the blink of an eye, bullet or kick are as casual as anything, nothing is in our hand. But falling should be easier, particularly in our age, on my bed, with dignity, don't want to be a fractured toy now" (346). Memories of her childhood, teenage and separation from her loved ones one by one in that land wraps her in a thin veneer of nostalgia. She rediscovers herself as Ali Anwar's Chanda and finds that she has travelled so far away from her own home and real character. The story concludes with Beti leaping out of the window, heaving a sigh of relief for fulfilled longing. It ends as abruptly as it opens.



Shree has crafted a story richly woven with images, symbols and metaphors that speak a lot unspoken. The form and structure of the novel are quite different. The story is narrated from multiple perspectives, with strokes of magical realism splashed here and there. There are constant slippings in and out of several layers, intermixing and contradicting. Chapters are of uneven length, some of them are just a few sentences, while two pages of another chapter are just one sentence. The casual way of narration makes the story highly relatable to Indian readers. The story does not progress in a linear manner and is a beautiful compilation of scattered thoughts and some loud thinking. In many instances it reminds us about *To the Light house*. The chapters are strewn with images from nature – earth, birds, flowers and animals – that at times the reader just feels the sheer magic of poetry. The powerful animal imagery reminds one of Ted Hughes’ poems, particularly the crow meeting at page 181. Through subtle sarcasm, Shree depicts the intensity of discrimination practised in Ma’s house, as in “shouting is a tradition, an ancient Indian custom upheld by eldest sons” (*Ret Samadhi*, 45).

The complex family system where binding thread is mostly fragile is apparent in the text. She says, “the state of families is rather like that of the city of Delhi” (187) and goes into a detailed comparison of the two. But her comparison of Indian family system with one of the compliments ascribed to *The Mahabharata* is a superb artistic imagination, almost awesome. See how beautifully she equates the family tamasha of Indian society with that of the great epic tale, “It should be said to family but is said to Mahabharata. What is there in the world is present in it and what is not there in it is also not present in The Mahabharata. Not even in the imagination of the poets. A deviated terrorist, confused leftist, feminist and women, defeated or victorious client, everything is present in the family or in Mahabharata, whichever you like” (109). The style of narration lures the readers to stay hooked to the book, unravelling the twists and turns, as the journey to Pakistan progresses.

*Ret Samadhi* will certainly disappoint if one is interested in reading a systematic plot with proper beginning, middle and an end. One will be disappointed more if he is interested in reading a sublime character’s journey and achievements. Total absence of human values and highly praised cultural values may entail more dejection to the readers. But if one is fond of enjoying textual and linguistic gymnastics in plot, if one is fond of reading intricate structure of texts and wide academic learning being reflected throughout the novel, here he can find a surfeit of it. The novel is not a tragic story about partition, rather, it is an unforgettable tale of the triumph of humanity, inclusivity and plurality. This is what makes it different from other partition pieces of literature of our time. The novel, through the strong character of Ma demonstrates “anything worth doing transcends borders” (*Ret Samadhi*, 12). The most evident crux of the novel is its South Asian dialectics which is not only preponderant but the

entire substance is made of that particular phenomenon. The politics of Booker award is continued with this text also because it has provided the award committee what it looks for but missing another equal share wherein the writer has projected a lot of positivity of Indian society. Truly the Book could have been more valuable if it had cherished certain more human and sociable values. To conclude, *Ret Samadhi* deserves the international acclaim and recognition for its metanarrative but it would be more acceptable if it has features certain merits of Indian family system that too is thriving in present day India.

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