

The Interplay of Self and Isolation in Geetanjali Shree's Tomb of Sand

OPEN ACCESS

Manuscript ID:
ASH-2026-140211278

Volume: 14

Issue: 2

Month: October

Year: 2026

P-ISSN: 2321-788X

E-ISSN: 2582-0397

Received: 05.08.2026

Accepted: 10.09.2026

Published Online: 01.10.2026

Citation:
Azzad, M. and Balande Chandoba Narsing. "The Interplay of Self and Isolation in Geetanjali Shree's Tomb of Sand." *Shanlax International Journal of Arts, Science and Humanities*, vol. 14, no. 2, 2026, pp. 20-25.

DOI:
<https://doi.org/10.34293/sijash.v14i2.11278>



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Abstract

This study aims to examine how psychological dynamics unfold amid emotional and social isolation stemming from the trauma experienced by some characters in Geetanjali Shree's novel *Tomb of Sand*. Donald Woods Winnicott, a British psychoanalyst, theorises the concepts of the 'True Self' and 'False Self', which are useful as a powerful framework for understanding how individuals balance authenticity with societal demands. According to Winnicott, these patterns emerge in early childhood as external pressures prompt individuals to conceal their natural impulses and present a more socially acceptable version of themselves – the False Self. This tension is further complicated by isolation, which Winnicott sees not only as loneliness or separation but also as something that can protect and nurture a person's True Self. Using Winnicott's theories as a guiding framework, this paper closely analyses *Tomb of Sand*, focusing on the characters of the novel, Ma and Beti. Their contrasting choices and emotional journeys reveal an ongoing struggle between meeting social expectations and staying true to oneself. The study uses close reading and the application of Winnicott's psychoanalytic theory to interpret the novel, aiming to show how isolation can serve both as a defense and as a space for personal growth. The analysis finds that both Ma and Beti undergo significant psychological changes due to their experiences of isolation. Ma, despite all the trauma she endures, can reconnect with her True Self later in life, while Beti's path remains more conflicted, demonstrating how deeply the False Self can take hold. Ultimately, this paper highlights isolation as both a shield and a source of renewal in the development of one's identity. A psychoanalytic analysis of the secondary characters, including Bade, Bahu, Rosie Bua, and Sidhartha, remains beyond the scope of this study and may be pursued in future research.

Keywords: True Self, False Self, Isolation, Natural Impulses, Defence Mechanism.

Introduction

Geetanjali Shree's *Retsamadhari*, originally published in Hindi in 2018 and in English as *Tomb of Sand* in 2021, is a novel that gained wider circulation after it won the 2022 International Booker Prize. As the novel was recently published, very few aspects of it have been explored. Some studies on the novel include decolonial interpretation (Sadana 2026), the gain and loss of translation (Sinha 2025), and a sense of violence and trauma (Sekaran and Pandey 2025). The novel has been less explored from a psychological perspective. The primary objective of this study is to bridge this gap by providing a psychological analysis in light of the True Self and False Self, conceptualized by the well-known psychologist Donald Woods Winnicott.

Donald Woods Winnicott (1896–1971) was a psychologist who developed the concepts of the True Self and False Self in his seminal work, *The Maturation Processes and the Facilitating Environment* (1968). In this book, he discusses the binary of the two selves of consciousness. He expands on the Freudian concepts of the id, ego, and superego, and further relates them

to the selves. He defines the 'true self' as the most original form of consciousness, which is present without any filter. The true self is not aware of the different layers of society; instead, it sees society in the way it deems fit, according to its understanding. According to Winnicott, only the true self can be creatively active and prosper because it is incorruptible. "Only the True Self can be creative and only the True Self can feel real" (Winnicott 177). He elaborates on it, saying that an individual's childhood is the time when this 'true self' flourishes most, because at that age the individual does not know the dos and don'ts of society and does whatever he/she feels like. Nevertheless, as they grow up in society, they are taught to live in a certain manner and behave according to the standards of society, and hence they have to put up a 'false self.' The 'true self' is the originator of the 'spontaneous gestures' of individuals, as it expresses itself without any fear of judgment or condemnation from society or the people surrounding them (Winnicott 177).

Winnicott explains the emergence and existence of the 'true self' as the result of the care that the mother provides to the child, which leads to the feeling of 'continuity of being', which is the feeling that the individual's existence is not threatened by external stimuli. The individual feels safe in the mother's care, leading to the flourishing of the 'true self.' Over time, the mother's constant care begins to decline, and the individual's needs are not regularly fulfilled. The feeling of an unsafe environment starts to sink in for the individual, and to cope with this change, he/she wants to protect the core of himself/herself; that is when he/she begins to hide his/her 'true self.' This serves as a survival strategy for them, and over time, they create their 'false self', which they present to society rather than any other identity. They conform to societal expectations and comply with social norms. "Gradually the degree of sophistication of the infant becomes such that it is more true to say that the False Self hides the infant's inner reality than to say that it hides the True Self" (Winnicott 178).

The 'false self' acts as a social mask for individuals that they have to put on, whether willingly or unwillingly, but they have to do so to sustain themselves in society. It relinquishes

personal authenticity and must comply with the law and order of the community in which it exists. It can also be seen as something that enables the individual to be independent of a caregiver, as they no longer require constant support to meet their needs. The 'false self' that they put up becomes self-sufficient. Similar to the Freudian concept of 'defence mechanisms', the 'false self' also acts as a defence of the 'true self' (. Winnicott sees it as the 'defence organization' that is there for the ego and protects it from all those external stimuli, including situations that might challenge the 'true self' (Winnicott 8). He emphasizes the importance of compliance, saying that "the false self is built up on a basis of compliance" (Winnicott 157). The individual has to comply with social norms, which the 'true self' finds an extremely difficult task to perform. It is not meant to conform to societal expectations; instead, it functions as a free being composed of an individual's innermost desires. Moreover, since it cannot be the self, the 'false self' comes to the rescue of the individual, and he/she presents a pretence in front of society. To understand the concept of the 'false self' in simpler terms, one can say that it acts as an elder sibling to the individual, with experience in society, who can fight against it by being part of it.

However, navigating through these societal expectations is not smooth sailing for the 'false self' either. There are times when it, too, faces hardships and feels exhausted as if it has done too much; the sense of futility and dissatisfaction kicks in. At that instant, it must employ defence mechanisms. It resorts to different mechanisms of suppression, subjugation, and isolation. "A principle governing human life could be formulated in the following words: only the true self can feel real, but the true self must never be affected by external reality, must never comply. When the false self is exploited and treated as real, there is a growing sense of futility and despair in the individual (Winnicott 157). Winnicott stays away from the Freudian 'Oedipus Complex' and presents another type of fixation towards the mother figure (Freud, "Analysis," 3). The child requires their mother for their basic daily needs. As long as the child's needs are taken care of, the child maintains the 'true self', but once the child starts growing up, their needs can no longer be fulfilled by the mother

figure; therefore, she substitutes her gestures, which the child then complies with (Winnicott 174). This initial compliance with the mother's gestures becomes the foundation of the 'false self.' Here, the child begins to understand that not all their desires can be met and that they cannot remain in their raw nature; hence, they put up a defensive self.

Its main function is to "hide and protect the True Self" (Winnicott 171). It allows the individual to comply with the demands of society and, in the process, build equations and relations with other people that, from the looks of it, might seem real. Every action of the false self seems authentic, but it appears that way because most people in society have put on a 'false self' themselves, which makes the actions of that individual seem real. It mostly creates a compromising relationship with other people, as the needs and desires of the 'true self' are ignored in the process. Those who constantly put on their false self struggle to recognise what is real and what is not. They start to get the sense of 'performing' in a situation rather than living it. Succumbing to peer pressure is a clear example of this, as people do things they do not want to avoid being ostracized by their groups. This takes a toll on their 'true self', which is not at all comfortable in such situations, while the 'false self' ensures that the individual complies with societal norms. From another perspective, one can say that it creates a socially acceptable position for the individual, where he/she is not discriminated against and is seen as part of the community.

Another major aspect of these concepts, as Winnicott discussed, is the impact of isolation on the self. Isolation, for Winnicott, is an essential component of anyone's life, and by isolation, he means isolating the 'true self.' He proposes that there should be no communication between the 'true self' and the external world (Winnicott 227). He suggests that if the true self takes the driving seat in consciousness, it will be corrupted by the ego. If the 'true self' is to flourish, it must remain isolated. He advocates permanent isolation, but even if that does not happen, the 'true self' should at least be isolated for as long as possible. The external environment must not influence the core of the personality, nor should there be any communication between the two. He claims that most people do not know the 'true self'

of the people they know: "the other fact is equally true, that each individual is an isolate, permanently non-communicating, permanently unknown, in fact unfound" (Winnicott 225). Winnicott advises that the core of the personality is the most worthy of preservation, and that one should keep this in mind. Isolation of individuals at an early stage of life is considered a health characteristic. It can be inferred that his idea of isolation ensures that the individual does not have to face anxiety-inducing situations in their life, so they can more easily survive in society. It also keeps the 'true self' safe, giving it time to get nourished without being corrupted, so that even if it emerges, it emerges safely.

Both Freud and Winnicott are similar in their approaches to understanding the self. Freud calls it the 'ego' and Winnicott calls it the 'true self', but the difference lies in the treatment of 'isolation.' One sees it as merely a mechanism that one has to employ to safeguard oneself, while the other sees it as an essential aspect of the process of growing up. If we try to find the similarities between their theorization, we may infer that the 'false self' is made up of Freud's 'super-ego' (Freud, *The Ego*, 10). The 'false self' is composed of the 'conscience' of the individual, which decides what is wrong and what is right, and acts accordingly.

In the novel *Tomb of Sand*, two characters in particular demonstrate the idea of 'true self' and 'false self' and show the impact of 'isolation' on their lives. The characters Ma and Beti are central to the novel's narrative, and their lives offer scope for a broader interpretation of traumatic psychological experiences. Examining these characters through the lens of Winnicott's concepts of the true and false self yields significant insights into the text's narrative dynamics.

Exploring the 'True and False Self' of Ma

The character of Ma in *Tomb of Sand* is an exact embodiment of what is understood as the 'true and false self.' The novel begins with her isolating herself from everyone after her husband's departure to the United States. When we analyzed this same situation in the earlier chapters, we found that she was using the defence mechanism of 'isolation', in which she emotionally and socially isolated herself from

everyone else. If we analyze it further, we can see that she was fed up with putting on her 'false self' for so long. She complied with all her duties and never flinched, even for a second. She kept everything to herself, be it the trauma of her days in Pakistan during the Partition or the sense of nostalgia that she had for her ancestral homeland. She did everything that was expected of her and more so. In the process, she kept losing her 'true self', only realizing it after her husband departed. Her 'false self' made it seem to everyone that she had been fine and happy all those years. That is why when she turns her back to the wall, everyone is surprised because they never saw it coming. Ma's 'true self' remains hidden, i.e., isolated for so long that she forgets who she was, and everyone believes the pretence. After the death of her husband, she is reminded of someone she lost when she migrated from Pakistan to India, and this brings her 'true self' into her consciousness. The futility and despair discussed earlier manifest in her emotions. She realizes that all of this was for nothing, for she never got the chance to reconcile with her people back in her homeland. She finally decides to put off her 'false self' and do something for herself.' She isolates herself from everyone, and that is where Winnicott's theory can be situated: only in isolation can one's 'true self' flourish. The 'false self' that she had for decades, she puts out of duty and isolates herself to safeguard her 'true self.' Her unexpected transformation, refusal to observe the rituals of widowhood, and becoming a 'wishing tree' mark the late-life re-emergence of the 'true self', which had long been suppressed under the weight of social expectations and her designated roles.

The family's reaction to her new stance shows how uncomfortable we are with the 'true self' and how it has been constructed so that the face one puts on in front of society is considered the real one. Anything other than this is not accepted by society. Society itself is not accustomed to the 'true self' because it is taught that one should always follow the norms laid out by society, and anything against these will be deemed immoral. Ma's open rebellion against these traditional norms is a prime example of how they affect individuals. She had complied with these norms for decades, and only when she realized their futility did she take a stand against them.

The author reveals the results of her rebellion. When she was in those preassigned roles, she never felt free; rather, it was as if her entire life revolved around her husband, her children, and the family, but she was missing from it. However, when she arrives at Beti's house and is relieved of her duties, she shows signs of being free. Her actions become more assertive, and she begins controlling the situation. She lives freely, talks freely without any filter, and is devoid of the tension that she used to carry. However, even then, she was still her daughter's mother, so she still had a layer of 'false self.' When she finally reaches Pakistan, we see her 'true self' take center stage as she gets excited about everything. She takes Beti to all the places that she knows there, and that too with a lot of enthusiasm. Beti gets tired, but she does not. She is in her freest form, which is her 'true self.' Only then does she reveal her past in Pakistan and the man she loved and considered her husband. The familiarity of the place and the sense of nostalgia break all the shackles in her mind, and she is absolutely happy. As Winnicott pointed out, 'isolation' is essential for the health of an individual; here, too, we can see the same happening, with Ma regaining her health after being isolated.

The Other Side of 'False Self': Exploring Beti's Life

Beti's character is the opposite of Ma's. On the one hand, Ma enters 'isolation' at a very late stage in her life, and on the other, Beti enters 'isolation' at a very young age. Because of her individualistic and rebellious wishes, her family opposes her, and as a result, she leaves home to live alone in the city and make a name for herself. Her 'true self', which wants to live freely, gets the chance to do so only when she is in isolation and is not answerable to anyone for her actions and choices. She becomes this strong, independent personality who makes her own decisions and handles everything, doing it all in 'isolation.' Therefore, she is supposed to be the happiest character in the novel, but that is not the case. She is still not content with the situation that she finds herself in. At any age, an individual desires the love and support of her family, but she does not get that for whatever reasons they have. Her 'true self' wants not only career success and independence

but also the love and support of her family, which she does not have. It can be inferred that Beti is also a part of this 'false self' game. She also puts up a farce of a very strong modern individual who does not need anyone, but from the inside, she craves a family. She is not exactly happy living alone, away from her family, but her past stance against them prevents her from admitting it to herself. When Ma falls, she goes to meet her, but even then, she does not concede to her mother's wishes. She maintains her 'false self' because she believes she cannot appear vulnerable in front of her family. Her vulnerability and fears eventually emerge in the later parts of the novel. She cannot understand the problems Ma faces, but she knows that she must care for her mother. When Ma is brought to her house, she begins to care for her as best she can. She does everything possible to help Ma get better.

"Beti became the mother, and made Ma the daughter" (Shree 241). She attends to Ma's every need, just as a mother would care for a child; that is why the novel's narrator also compares her to a mother. This, taking care of her mother and treating her as a child, shows Beti's hidden desires. The desires that could never be fulfilled because she had to live alone, away from her family. She wanted to be treated like that, to be pampered like that, but she could get none of it. So, when the opportunity presented itself, maybe not in the way she would have wanted, but still, she grabbed it and showered all the love she could on her mother. In her mother, she saw her 'true self.' She had also started feeling happy, so much so that even the lack of sleep did not bother her. She devoted herself to Ma's care.

Beti's insecurities and vulnerabilities surface when both Ma and Beti go to Pakistan. When Beti finds out about Ma's past, she refuses to acknowledge it, completely ignoring the fact that there could be more to someone's life than what their kith and kin know. When she is captured in Khyber, she pleads with the almighty to be returned to India as soon as possible; that is when she also realizes that all she wants is the care and support KK (her lover) provides. She shows signs of vulnerability, which she had earlier rejected, to appear tough to everyone. When Ma came to her house, she rejected all the advances KK made towards her because she did not want Ma

to feel any disregard for her for having a romantic life without getting married. Her fear of her image in Ma's eyes becomes the catalyst for her putting up her 'false self' for Ma as well. There are many glimpses of her 'true self' throughout the novel, but every time they show some signs of existence, one situation or another ensures that they remain hidden.

Both these characters play a back-and-forth game between their 'true self' and their 'false self', where only Ma emerges victorious, putting her 'false self' behind her the moment she enters Pakistan and living the rest of her life that way until her death. Her jovial, fun-loving personality finds major relief there and is evident everywhere. Whereas, Beti finds it a task to juggle between her 'true self' and her 'false self'. She keeps shuffling between the two, and only at the end of the novel does she find her actual inner voice, which she deems fit to carry on for the rest of her life. The contrasting relationships of these characters with their 'inner selves' are indicative of the everyday situations in people's lives. There are so many such situations, where individuals cannot find a balance between these two 'selves', and they have to make way for the 'false self', which in turn sends them into such an isolation that is not comfortable for them.

Conclusion

Thus, in the novel, isolation does not merely mean loneliness or alienation from society; it is also a necessary space for the characters' metamorphosis. The characters manage to find their true calling because of being in 'isolation.' The beginning of their transformation is marked by their 'isolation.' Ma's withdrawal from her family allows her to shed her false self and pursue her interests that she had suppressed for decades. She understands herself and what she wants, and ultimately gets it through her free will. Beti's separation from the family allows her to explore herself and her interests. She can do what her 'true self' wants, and in doing so, she realizes that, along with being independent, she also needs the care and support of her family, which later mends her relationship with her mother and, by extension, her family. The novel intricately weaves Winnicott's concepts of the true and false selves into the lives of its characters and, through their stories,

presents a narrative that reveals the universality of these concepts and their implications in our everyday lives. The constant tussle between our inner selves and societal expectations is something we witness daily and experience in our lives, which, in turn, makes these concepts highly relevant.

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