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Between Resisting and Reaffirming: How the Body Matters in Geetanjali Shree's *Tomb of Sand*

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Abstract

*The consideration of body as a space allows for the investigation into the manner in which the body is constructed and perceived. Research has shown that bodies acquire meanings that transcend the sphere of biology. This research aims to present an intersection between body studies and spatial literary studies. Through the analysis of the novel *Tomb of Sand* by Geetanjali Shree, the paper claims that body of the protagonist Ma functions as a space to perform twofold functions. On one hand, the space of her body, permits Ma to resist the familial and societal roles imposed on her. On the other hand, it becomes a liberative space wherein Ma reaffirms her identity as an emancipated woman. Through a textual analysis of Ma and her interactions with the other characters, this paper seeks to evaluate the space of the body. It relies on the theoretical perspectives on the concept of agency and the body by Adriana Zaharijevic. The paper thus contributes to the larger discourse on the body by offering spatial dimension to body studies.*

Keywords: Body, Space, Agency, Identity, Roles.

Introduction

The discourse on humanities has witnessed the emergence of numerous trends that have shaped the literary and cultural landscape. One such topic that generated debates and discussions through the amalgamation of perspectives from the diverse fields of sociology, anthropology and cultural studies is the human body. The research on the body in the sphere of humanities and social sciences boomed in the last decade of the twentieth century. Bryan S. Turner states that the body as a topic of research can be viewed as a "response to technological and scientific changes, and to a range of diverse social movements that have been associated with them such as the women's movement, environmentalism, animal rights movements, anti-globalism, religious fundamentalism and conservative politics" (1).

The notion of the body accumulates sociological and cultural meanings in addition to its biological functions. In fact, the consideration of the body as that which is cultural as it is biological, has allowed the investigation into the nature of its construction.

The body functions as a space onto which meanings are imposed and formulated. In his influential work, *The Production of Space*, Henri Lefebvre divides space into three fields such as physical, mental and social. While elaborating on the third field, Lefebvre propounds that the body functions as a social space (Lefebvre 40). The meanings acquired by the body is not devoid of its social roots. In other words, the body functions as a social space owing to the communications it gives rise to, they relationships or interactions it facilitates and the communal practices it takes part in.

Primary Text

Geetanjali Shree's novel, *Tomb of Sand* is a narrative that foregrounds the importance of the body as a social space. As a work of partition literature, it was originally published as *Ret Samadhi* in Hindi in 2018 and then translated to English by Daisy Rockwell in 2022. As the winner of the International Booker Prize of 2022, the novel captures the aftermath of the partition and its influence on the protagonist even after several decades. The octogenarian protagonist Ma, is an eighty-year-old woman who, after the death of her husband, refashions her way of living. She initially lives in her son, Bade's house and then shifts to her daughter, Beti's house and finally reaches the home of her husband before the partition, Anwar in Pakistan.

Besides her travel to numerous places, the body of Ma undergoes significant changes. From the way she dresses to the manner in which she talks about her body to her companions, Ma treats her body as a space where present identities can be erased and past identities can be reclaimed. The performance of her role and identity unfolds in the space of her body. In her essay titled, "On Butler's Theory of Agency" Adriana Zaharijevic states that the process of becoming a gender by the repetition of certain acts is "enacted through and with the body" (25).

Metamorphosis of Ma's Body

After moving to Beti's flat, Ma reimagines herself as a child. Her daughter Beti authoritatively fixes herself into the role of the mother or a care-giver. The exchange of identities signals a shift in their attitude towards each other and themselves. Ma's body in this instance supports the rebirth metaphorically. It is no longer weighed down by societal expectations and demands. Instead, it allows her to spread like sunlight to every nook and cranny of the flat (Shree 252). Ma's body transforms in Beti's home in terms of how it moves, acts, and communicates. Ma uses her body as a tool to fight against social standards by rejecting the identities of widow, mother-in-law, and mother. She also rejects the constraints imposed by age and familial roles and defies the expectations that are placed on her as an elderly woman.

Ma uses her body as a canvas to explore and redefine herself on an emotional and psychological level. Her body embodies the wonder, joy, and innocence as she takes on the identity of a reborn child. Ma now views life with a new perspective, free from the burden of her past and the expectations of society. Ma's body contributes to the creation of a different environment in Beti's home, one where she is free to explore and reaffirm her new identity. The space of Beti's flat evokes a sense of freedom for Ma. In this realm of possibilities, Ma internalises the freedom. As a result, her body is no longer imprisoned by the limitations of age or societal expectations.

Ma's body is described as "soft and delicate and naked as a baby" after Beti gives her a bath (Shree 256). Physically, Ma's body accumulates the vulnerability that accompanies both birth and old age. Emotionally, she considers her transformation a chance to experience life all over again. She befriends the cook, gardener, fruit and vegetable vendors and neighbours in the vicinity and establishes cordial relations with them (Shree 280). Her body in this instance becomes the site for interpersonal interactions that transcend the boundaries of age, gender and class.

Reaffirmation of the Liberated Self

Instead of moulding herself to suit the constraints imposed on her, Ma's body expresses a newfound freedom and vitality akin to a child's. This manifests through increased energy, spontaneity, and curiosity in her movements and actions. Ma's body is susceptible to discomforts of various kinds. She is vocal about them and shares them with her daughter. Ma admits that she wet the bed while sleeping (Shree 260). She also complains about the warts and pimples on her body. Yet, it is not with sheer disgust that she speaks about these. In fact, Geetanjali Shree writes that Ma talks about her body like "an excited school girl" (Shree 260). Moreover, she inspects her body to revel at its eccentricities. Her body is compared to that of a coat which she now wears "inside out" (Shree 269).

As opposed to the gradual decline in energy and spirit, Ma is seized by the urge to explore. She discovers her body anew and also what she can do with her body. Ma "seeks", "caresses", "examines" and "displays" the veins, cysts, blisters, wounds and patches (Shree 269). Ma eats a variety of dishes, a practice she had abandoned when she was at her son's house. Along with Beti, she watches movies in English (Shree 277). She teams up with her friend Rosie, to repurpose old and discarded items. Rosie, who is a close confidante of Ma, is a eunuch stitches loose-fitting clothes for Ma. In Beti's flat, Ma experiences the utmost control over her body. She switches to the gowns that Rosie stitches for her instead of opting for sarees. Rosie prepares ointments for Ma to apply to the roots of her hair (Shree 313). Ma diligently follows the routine as she prioritizes her health and well-being. It also reflects her consideration of her body as something worthy of care and attention.

The agency possessed exists at the "juncture between our acts and the conditions that generate them" (Zaharijevic 27). In the novel, Ma exercises her agency as a liberated woman through her body. Her body performs the act of resisting the rules imposed on her and subsequently discarding them. Her acts of expanding her social circle, engaging in activities that are new to her and initiating conversations which were initially considered a taboo are examples of the ways in which Ma uses her agency.

Conclusion

It is imperative to note the conditions that create a circumstance conducive for the practicing of her agency. Beti creates an inclusive environment for Ma to reclaim her identity as a woman unperturbed by numerous roles. In other words, the safe haven that Ma finds comfort in contributes to the refashioning of her agency. Thus, the body emerges as a space where Ma finds her agency. Ma uses her body to communicate aspects of her identity by resisting the norms to assert her agency and challenge existing societal norms. Her body is thus a site of contestation where certain practices are adopted while the rest are rejected. Thus, the body as a social space allows individuals to accept or reject and conform or counter the established ideals of the mainstream society. The aspect of agency remains inseparable from the body especially, when the two are used as weapons against oppression.

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