Exploring Narrative and Self in Geetanjali Shree's "Tomb of Sand"

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Abstract: By closely examining Geetanjali Shree's "Tomb of Sand," this research paper aims to shed light on the intricate connections between narrative and self. Through an exploration of the protagonist's journey, the transformative power of narratives, the construction of personal narratives, and the fluidity of self and identity, this study seeks to deepen our understanding of the novel's themes and its larger implications for our understanding of human experiences. By engaging with the complexities of storytelling and the representation of selfhood, this analysis contributes to the existing scholarship on narrative and self while highlighting the literary achievements of Geetanjali Shree's notable work.

Keywords: Narrative, self, selfhood, memory, partition, identity

I. INTRODUCTION

The concept of narrative and self refers to the way individuals construct and understand their personal identity and life experiences through storytelling and the creation of a cohesive narrative.Narrative can be understood as the framework through which people make sense of their lives. It involves organizing events, memories, and experiences into a meaningful sequence, often following a cause-and-effect structure. Narratives provide a sense of continuity, coherence, and purpose to one's life story. They allow individuals to interpret and give meaning to their past, present, and future, shaping their understanding of who they are.

The self, on the other hand, is the individual's perception of their own identity and personality. It encompasses one's thoughts, emotions, beliefs, values, and behaviours, as well as their relationships with others and their social roles. The self is not a fixed entity but rather a complex and evolving construct influenced by various internal and external factors.

The relationship between narrative and self lies in the idea that individuals use narratives to construct and maintain their sense of self. By creating a coherent and consistent narrative, people establish a personal identity and develop a sense of self-continuity over time. The narrative provides a framework for organizing and integrating various life events and experiences into a cohesive story, allowing individuals to understand themselves and communicate their identity to others.Time and memory play a crucial role in the formation of narrative. Merleau-Ponty, expressed that the “now” keeps varying as the perspectives and interests of the narrator and reader changes (Kerby). The idea of time can be understood as “Lived time, the time of our lives, is obviously not devoid of meaning. It is not a mere succession of neutral points, a formal grid transparent with respect to the content of experience” (Kerby).

Furthermore, narratives can also shape and influence the self. The stories we tell ourselves and others about our experiences, achievements, challenges, and aspirations contribute to our self-perception and self-esteem. The narratives we construct may highlight certain aspects of our identity while downplaying or omitting others, thus shaping our self-concept.

It is important to note that narratives and the self are not purely objective or fixed entities but rather subjective and malleable constructs influenced by personal interpretations, cultural contexts, and social interactions. Different individuals may construct different narratives about the same set of experiences, and narratives can evolve and change over time as new experiences and perspectives emerge. In this paper we shall locate the concept of narrative and self in the novel “Tomb of Sand” written by Booker Prize winner Geetanajali Shree.

II. EXPLORING THE CONCEPT OF NARRATIVE AND SELF IN “THE TOMB OF SAND”

Geetanjali Shree, born on June 1, 1957, is a renowned Indian author and novelist. She is known for her significant contributions to contemporary Hindi literature. Her works often delve into the themes of identity, gender and intersection of tradition and modernity. She made her literary debut with critically acclaimed novel “Maya Darpan” in 2001. Her other notable works include, “Humara Shahar Us Baras” (2002), “Tirohit” (2009), and “Kshan” (2011). She is the first Hindi writer to win the prestigious International Booker Prize award for her novel “Ret Smadhi” which was

translated into English as “Tomb of Sand” by Daisy Rockwell. This recognition has given a way for research and discourse of Indian literature the domain of translation studies, cultural studies, partition literature and feminist theories. Geetanjali Shree's novel, "Tomb of Sand," is a literary masterpiece that explores the intricacies of human existence, selfhood, and the power of storytelling. Published in 1992, the novel has garnered critical acclaim for its poetic language, evocative imagery, and profound exploration of identity and memory.

Set in post-independence India, "Tomb of Sand" follows the journey of its protagonist, a woman named Vasanti, as she navigates the complex terrain of her own self-discovery. Through a nonlinear narrative structure, Shree weaves together multiple timelines, perspectives, and voices, creating a rich tapestry of experiences that challenge traditional notions of linear storytelling.

The novel delves into Vasanti's search for personal identity and meaning amidst the shifting social and cultural landscape of India. As she embarks on a quest to understand her own history and ancestry, Vasanti grapples with the intersection of personal and collective narratives, the fluidity of selfhood, and the power dynamics inherent in storytelling. It evident that “The fundamental aspect of the novel, i.e., cliff-hangers and narrative twists, is how the tale moves” (Singh 1).

Shree's masterful prose not only captures the external world of postcolonial India but also delves deeply into the internal landscapes of her characters. Through vivid descriptions, rich metaphors, and poignant symbolism, the author immerses the reader in the emotional and psychological depths ofVasanti’s journey.Moreover, "Tomb of Sand" engages with broader themes of gender, sexuality, patriarchy, and social hierarchies, illuminating the ways in which these factors shape and constrain individual lives. Shree challenges societal norms and highlights the struggles faced by women in a male-dominated society, offering a nuanced exploration of gender roles and the complexities of female identity.Agawam stated “The metaphorical point that the narrator is trying to make is that the women have suffered oppression and inequality in their own homes and their own society” (1735).

By blurring the boundaries between reality and memory, Shree invites readers to question the reliability of personal narratives and the nature of truth itself. Through fragmented storytelling and the interplay of multiple voices, she challenges traditional notions of authorship and invites the reader to actively engage with the text, constructing their own interpretations and meaning.

"Tomb of Sand" stands as a remarkable literary work that delves into the depths of human existence, interrogating the nature of selfhood, memory, and storytelling. Geetanjali Shree's poetic prose and nuanced exploration of identity make this novel a significant contribution to the literary landscape of postcolonial India. By unravelling the intricate threads of narrative and self, Shree invites readers to reflect on their own stories and the complexities of the human experience.

In Geetanjali Shree's "Tomb of Sand," the complex relationship between narrative and self is a central theme that shapes the protagonist's journey and challenges traditional storytelling conventions. The novel explores the formation and transformation of identity, the role of memory, and the construction of personal narratives. Through its nonlinear narrative structure, the novel examines the fluid nature of selfhood and the power dynamics inherent in the act of storytelling.

One of the primary ways in which narrative and self intersect in the novel is through the protagonist's quest for self-understanding. Vasanti, the central character, embarks on a journey to uncover her own history and ancestral roots. As she delves into her past, she constructs a narrative of her identity, piecing together fragmented memories and stories. The act of narrating her own life becomes a means of self-discovery and self-definition, allowing her to make sense of her place in the world.

Memory plays a crucial role in the formation of both personal and collective narratives. Vasanti's recollections and the memories of other characters shape the storytelling process, blurring the lines between past and present. The novel challenges the notion of objective truth by highlighting the subjective nature of memory and the ways in which it can be influenced and reconstructed over time. Through this exploration, Shree emphasizes the malleability of personal narratives and raises questions about the reliability and authenticity of individual accounts.

The novel's fragmented narrative structure further reinforces the complexity of narrative and self. Shree employs nonlinearity, multiple perspectives, and shifting timelines to depict the multifaceted nature of human experiences and the challenges of representing them through a single coherent narrative. The fractured nature of the narrative mirrors the fragmented nature of Vasanti's own identity, as she grapples with the different roles and personas she occupies in her life. The disjointed storytelling invites readers to actively engage with the text and piece together their own understanding of the protagonist's journey.Aparna Aggrawal writes “She had grown weary of giving them her breath, experiencing their emotions, carrying their desires, and carrying their resentments. She longed to glide into the wall with the tremor because she was sick of everyone” (1737). "Would the crevice itself start breathing if a bug slipped into it?" she wondered” (Shree 39).

Moreover, "Tomb of Sand" explores the power dynamics inherent in the act of storytelling. The novel interrogates the politics of narration, highlighting how narratives can be influenced by social and cultural forces. The protagonist's voice is often silenced or overshadowed by dominant narratives, particularly those shaped by patriarchy and societal

expectations. Shree exposes the biases and limitations of storytelling, challenging readers to critically examine the authority and authenticity of different narrative perspectives.

III. CONCLUSION

In conclusion, Geetanjali Shree's "Tomb of Sand" intricately weaves together the themes of narrative and self. Through the protagonist's quest for self-understanding, the role of memory, the fragmented narrative structure, and the exploration of power dynamics, the novel delves into the complexities of identity formation and storytelling. Shree's work challenges traditional notions of linear narratives and invites readers to reflect on the fluid nature of selfhood and the subjective construction of personal narratives. "Tomb of Sand" stands as a thought-provoking exploration of the intricate interplay between narrative and self in the context of postcolonial India.

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