

The Uncanny in Geetanjali Shree's Tomb of Sand: Subverting the Reality

Nabanita Chakraborty¹

Abstract

This paper explores Geetanjali Shree's postmodern novel *Tomb of Sand* which falls in the liminal space between the real and the fantastic. Her novel interrogates the relevance of borders and boundaries; not only the geographical and psychological borders in post-partition India but borders defining gender identities, human and non-human worlds, familiar and strange. Shree provides a feminist lens to grasp the concept of Freud's theory of the uncanny. Freud in his essay *The Uncanny* explains that the uncanny is not something unfamiliar but the familiar which is kept hidden or repressed. He explores the various dimensions of the uncanny like animism, magic, déjà vu, doubling, repetition in thoughts and language, fear of castration, queerness and return to the maternal body. Geetanjali Shree underscores how the feeling of uncanny can be associated with dissonance and strangeness in moving beyond or challenging the socially constructed habits and compartments of gendered bodies. The feeling of being out of sorts with one's own body, breaking down boundaries and rules constructed by society, challenging the normative ideal and unearthing what has been silenced in culture, engenders the feeling of uncanny.

Keywords: Freud; uncanny; Geetanjali Shree; *Tomb of Sand*; repressed desires

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This is the fact that an uncanny effect often arises when the boundary between fantasy and reality is blurred, when we are faced with the reality of something that we have until now considered imaginary... (Freud, p 30)

I. Introduction

Fantasy literature has traditionally been seen as an escape from reality and a challenge to the realist form of fiction. For Postmodernists, however, fantasy is associated with the framing of borders (between real and unreal) and the experience of liminality.² This liminal space, constituted by language, can question or subvert our familiarity and acceptance of the given world. The art of defamiliarisation (Victor Shklovsky) and intellectual uncertainty or a feeling of 'uncanny' (Freud) can jolt the reader to a deeper understanding of the world. For Shklovsky, a technique of art is to make objects unfamiliar where the artfulness becomes important rather

¹ Nabanita Chakraborty, Associate Professor, Dept of English, Hansraj College, University of Delhi, India.

E-mail: nabanita@hrc.du.ac.in

² The most influential study of fantasy is Todorov's *The Fantastic* (1973).



than the object itself. Freud's essay "The Uncanny" (1919)³ explores the liminal space between the familiar and the strange. He explains that the uncanny is not unfamiliar but the familiar which is kept hidden or repressed. This paper will explore the uncanny dimension within fantasy literature. The uncanny is not an unreal space/experience but a reality which has been hidden. Overfamiliarisation with our everyday world might not allow us to realise the injustices and inadequacies hidden in our political world. Thus the uncanny can unsettle the reader's experience and subvert reality. Fantasy literature might not be something completely revolutionary but it has the potential to disturb the reader's normative ideas of reality. Freud challenges the Enlightenment notion that reason is a tool for ordering the world and rendering it familiar and comprehensible. Through his analysis of the uncanny, Freud explains that categorising something as familiar will necessarily implicate the recognition of its other, the unfamiliar.

This paper explores Geetanjali Shree's postmodern novel *Tomb of Sand* which falls in the liminal space between the real and the fantastic. The dominant narrative of the novel concerns the effect of the cataclysmic vivisection of the Indian subcontinent in 1947. Yet unlike other Partition literature, the novel neither attempts to provide a mimetic representation of the historic event nor does it deal with the tropes of trauma, violence and loss of the Partition riots. Instead, the novel has a light-hearted humourous tone and delves into the realm of the improbable and fantastic which disturb the presumption of a rational world order. It thus blurs the boundaries between familiar and strange; between man and woman; and between human and non-human. The fantasy element in the novel creates a world of non-human beings who are active agents or characters; it also reconfigures certain familiar elements of the human world to produce something strange or unfamiliar. Without providing any direct psychoanalytical reference to Freud's theory, Shree presents a lens to grasp the concept of the uncanny. The various dimensions of the uncanny cited by Freud in his essay are present in the novel like animism, magic, déjà vu, doubling, repetition in thoughts and language, fear of castration, queerness and return to the maternal body. I wish to clarify that the term uncanny in literature is often associated with Gothic tales of horror or supernatural terror. But this novel does not evoke fear and still manages to produce uncanny feelings by constantly interrogating and undermining the real. The novel, to borrow Rosemary Jackson's phrase, "traces the unsaid and unseen of culture, that which has been silenced, made invisible, covered over and made absent (Jackson, p2). There is an intellectual uncertainty associated with the strange and fantastic occurrences in the novel. I argue that *Tomb of Sand* can be read as a feminist response to Freud's theory of the uncanny.

II. Freud's The Uncanny

The uncanny is a sensation or a feeling of fear or strangeness in experiencing something familiar but alienated from the mind through the process of repression. Freud feels uneasiness and fear (a sense of uncanny) as he engages with a new domain, literature. He soon realises that literature is not an unfamiliar territory for him as he navigates through fictional narratives, myths, personal anecdotes and fairy tales. Freud's "The Uncanny" is a metadiscourse on literature. It falls in the liminal space between literary criticism and psychoanalysis. It is a strangeness of drawing borders between literature and non-literature. Pursuing the etymological meaning of uncanny in different languages, Freud examines the German term

³ Subsequent references are to the 2003 Penguin Books edition of Freud's *The Uncanny*.



Unheimlich which merges with its opposite *Heimlich* to show that the unfamiliar is actually “a species of the familiar” (p 134). He argues that the unfamiliar is actually the familiar which has been kept a secret. Freud begins his analysis by retelling one of the uncanny stories of E.T.A. Hoffman’s ‘The Sandman’ (1816) which contains elements like strange sights, doubling, animism, fear of losing eyes, and déjà vu. Freud cites Ernst Jentsch, the first theorist of uncanny literature, who has explained that uncanny effects can be produced by keeping the readers in intellectual uncertainty. Freud refutes Jentsch’s argument and states that the uncanniness of ‘The Sandman’ arises from the fear of blindness and in turn, the fear of castration since there is a substitutive relationship between the eyes and the male organ. For Freud, the uncanny element in the story is due to the anxiety caused by the infantile castration complex and the figure of the sandman as a double. He dismisses the role of the automaton doll in arousing fear, though feminists have ascribed it to Freud’s fear of castration and his homosexuality.⁴ Freud in the later part of the essay recounts some personal anecdotes, tales and myths to explain other factors giving rise to the feeling of uncanny like instantaneous wish fulfilment, the omnipotence of thoughts, a compulsion to return, unintended repetition, a feeling of déjà vu and death. For him, uncanny fears are obscure revelations of an unconscious psychic activity and repressed childhood complexes. However, even Freud, the psychoanalyst, is at a loss to explain the uncanny experiences of Freud, the protagonist in the narrative. His narrative digresses, escapes control and fails to fully analyse the phenomenon of the uncanny.

III. Rereading the Uncanny in *Tomb of Sand*

Geetanjali Shree is an Indian novelist and short story writer in Hindi. Her novel *Ret Samadhi*, translated as *Tomb of Sand* by Daisy Rockwell⁵ won the International Booker Prize in 2022. The novel is, like Freud’s essay on ‘The Uncanny’, about the experience of liminality, being caught at the threshold of life and death, man and woman, reality and fantasy. The similarity with Freud’s essay does not end there. Some of the factors like animism, magic, a belief in the transformative quality of thoughts, repetition in thoughts and language, queerness and return to the maternal body are the aspects of the uncanny present in Geetanjali Shree’s novel. She does not mention the term uncanny or provide any psychoanalytic theorisation or Freudian references in her novel. Instead, she focuses on the distinctive feelings and bodily experiences of gendered subjects, both to expose the patriarchal oppressions women often reinforce and to explore liberating possibilities. She underscores how the feeling of uncanny can be associated with dissonance and strangeness in moving beyond or challenging the socially constructed habits and comportments of gendered bodies. The feeling of being out of sorts with one’s own body, breaking down boundaries and rules constructed by society, challenging the normative ideal and unearthing what has been silenced in culture, engenders the feeling of uncanny. The author posits how bodies alone are not just vulnerable to social norms of looking and behaving but minds are also conditioned to think and imagine in a certain way. Any aberration from the norm results in discomfort and a feeling of strangeness. The return of repressed desires of women may instil fears in others even if they may have a liberating effect on the subjects. Shree further explores how representing an undefined body (a

⁴ Helene Cixous notes that Freud’s story of ‘The Sandman’ tries to but fails to repress homosexuality (Cixous, p 53 8).

⁵ Subsequent references are to the 2022 Penguin Books edition of *Tomb of Sand* and will be cited parenthetically by page number in the text.

transexual body) or an indeterminate growth in the body (a penis-like cyst in a woman) through language can cause unease since it is both familiar and strange.

The dominant narrative in the novel (among numerous other intertwined tales) is that of an octogenarian widow's journey towards emancipation from societal constraints and expectations. The novel challenges the linear trajectory of human narrative since it begins with an old widow's depression, sickness and unwillingness to live and ends with defiance, youthful vigour and a rekindled love. It is a "tale of a dying woman evol[ving] into a story about her thriving and flourishing" (p 698). The narrative strikes us as unfamiliar since it overturns the convention of bildungsroman, the journey of the protagonist from childhood to maturity, and instead, it dwells on the journey of the aged woman from old age maturity to childlike innocence. It is a tale about the return from death-like living to exuberant living. The novel reminds us to get rid of the insecurities about old age, sickness and death in the real world and recognise the sap of life, the jouissance⁶. Social custom demands old women to be responsible, worldly wise, inactive and conventional. But Shree's old widow unburdens herself of all her responsibilities towards the family and instead fulfils all her hidden desires and wishes, kept repressed and silenced by custom. The old mother undertakes a journey to Pakistan with her daughter to find her ex-husband Ali Anwer, who was forcibly separated from her during the Partition riots. In her new life in partitioned India, the old woman had kept her relationship with the Muslim man a well-guarded secret from her Hindu husband and his family for several decades. The return of the repressed, her love for Ali Anwer, hidden from sight by custom, generates the feeling of uncanny.

IV. *Tomb of Sand*: Uncanny in Form and Language

Words. But what are words, really, hmmm? They're mere sounds with meanings dangling from them. They have no logic. They find their own way. Arising from the squabble between a sinking body and a drowning mind, they grab hold of antonyms. The seed planted was a date tree; what blossomed was hibiscus. They wrestle with themselves —wrapped up in their own game. (Shree, p 20)

Geetanjali Shree draws attention to the uncertainty regarding the representation of reality through language.⁷ The self-reflexive mode of language poses questions about the relationship between fantasy and reality. She proposes that since the linguistic system is so arbitrary and unreliable, the real world which is constituted by it, will equally be untenable and incoherent. So the boundary between fantasy and reality can be effaced. The same logic is extended to the literary convention where multiple narrative voices replace a unified, omniscient, authoritative narrator. The narrative begins with a third-person narrator, whose identity is kept a mystery, stating that he/she is not a "character in the story" but is present in "the party" (p 96). But soon, the narrator decides:

But now my time's up. I take a bow and leave these pages. Whatever comes next won't be said by me. (p 97).

The readers are left wondering who would narrate the remaining major part of the story. The readers are drawn into the mysteries of literary creation as an alter ego or a double seems to have taken over the task. However, the earlier narrator decides to return in the middle of the

⁶ Jouissance in Kristeva is a feminine libidinal drive or pleasure repressed by the symbolic order.

⁷ The text I am referring to is the English translation of Shree's Hindi novel which received the Booker Prize. Thus indeterminacy in language is already inherent in the process of translation.



story again, taking up a first-person voice and informing the reader that he/she has “barged [my] way in again” even though she had promised to have “gone for good” (p 347). She confuses the reader by enquiring if she could be considered a witness to the events of the story since the meaning of the word ‘witness’ is problematic:

Who saw Salman Khan kill that deer? Did he himself drive his car over the poor people sleeping on the pavement or was it his driver, and what was the crime and who was the criminal? And who were the criminals and who the upholders of the law in the Dadri lynching, and among those cow protectionists? (p 347)

As the real and the fictional worlds become the same and the narrative voices change, the readers approach the text with distrust and fascination as there is uncertainty and confusion at the core of the novel. The narrative rambles its way forward digressing into politics, philosophy, mysticism, poetry and even nonsensical words:

The Sufis and wise men have said that the body is a mirror a home a fine shawl a rainbow; clay fluid deep blue sky; it is a snake a lion probably a cow and a deer too. (p 437)

The narrator does not follow either logic, syntax or punctuation. The narrator seems to have lost his/her way (like Freud in his anecdotal journey in Italy) and digresses repeatedly from the storytelling. The familiar and the strange, *Heimlich* and *Unheimlich* turn into each other as the reader is left with an intellectual uncertainty (uncanniness).

The form of the novel undermines any neat structure. The novel is divided into unequal segments: random sections with blank pages, segments having just a few lines while the rest have longer chapters. *Tomb of Sand* obliterates the formal boundaries of a narrative with a beginning, middle and end. The language of the novel is both material and immaterial, concrete and abstract, connecting the signifier and the signified, the content and form and then severing them. Words are slippery just like contexts, any attempt to constrain, confine and stabilise the meaning ultimately produces a new meaning and form.

No, no, I won't get up. Nooooo, I won't rise nowwww. Nooo rising nyoooww. Nyoooo riiiiise nyoooo. Now rise new. Now, I'll rise anew. (p 21)

The breakdown of meaningful, syntactical language in *Tomb of Sand* indicates a way of communicating with the larger universe of objects, animals and plants. Beyond human language, it is a means to be in touch with the very elixir or sap of life. It is also a way to make the unfamiliar more familiar.

V. *Tomb of Sand*: Delimiting Genre

Freud in “The Uncanny” uses literature to put forth his psychoanalytic theory and yet the fictional narrative and anecdotes escape control, threatening to move beyond any specific genre. Geetanjali Shree’s novel undermines generic boundaries. Shree’s novel is literary but at times it drifts off to an invasive metadiscourse, philosophical reflections and even literary criticism. It is a personal story of partition but it also defies any definitive dominant genre.⁸ It frustrates the reader's attempt to pin it down to a historical context of India's partition. It

⁸ Tzvetan Todorov argues that the fantastic is caught between the two literary genres: the uncanny and the marvellous and yet the uncanny is not “a clearly delimited genre.” (Todorov, p 46)

is this broadening of the contextual paradigm which provides a universality to the narrative. It is, and is not, the story of partition. The space of the narrative is inscribed onto the body of the old woman and not the fractured subcontinent as it occurs in other partition literature.⁹ The body of Ma, the octogenarian woman, becomes a site of narrative and yet the body has an ephemeral and effervescent materiality which keeps slipping away from getting defined.

The story of lost love and suffering during the Partition riots is one of the many intertwined stories in the novel. Shree's playful and lighthearted storytelling keeps darkness at bay. Avoiding the trope of trauma, Shree uses many digressions to make it both strange and familiar at the same time. The story of Partition cannot be "locked into a box, or a canvas, or a gaze" (p 577). It has to be left boundless so that the "story could move on at will and take another path if it so desired" (p 577). For the author, boundaries are restrictive, whether literary genres, geographical borders or sexual identities. The novel instead traces the unsaid, that is, the unconscious drives of an old woman which remain repressed and silenced by the laws of society.

VI. *Tomb of Sand*: The Uncanny in Return to the Maternal Body

Freud argues that the uncanny is associated with the compulsion to return to the maternal body and a fear of castration.

There is something uncanny about the female genitalia... 'I know this place, I've been here before', this place can be interpreted as representing his mother's genitals or her womb. (Freud, p 151)

Geetanjali Shree's narrative digresses, pauses, repeats and compulsively returns to the subject of the maternal body. The novel is about the old mother, her repressed desires and the various mysteries of her body. The temporality of the narrative does not focus on the historic moment of vivisection of the subcontinent and the consequent horrors of riots and bloodshed. Instead, the rhythmic movement and unfurling of the aged female body measure the time of the narrative.¹⁰ The bodily time inverts the linear clock time. The aged, fragile, aching, insipid body of the old woman gradually becomes a free, indomitable young girl discovering anew the mysteries of the body.

Wart, mole pimple freckle: bursting and busting these was becoming Ma's daily ritual...Ma speaks of her body like an excited girl who says, Listen! Good news, my period's started, I won't go to school today... (p 260)

The shrivelled-up body of the mother, who has long experienced menopause, becomes a site of mystery. A phallus-like cyst growing in her body is uncanny since it is a reminder of a castrated phallus, a trace of something. The doctors insist on operating on the cystic growth which is unfamiliar, strange and uncanny on a woman's body.

It is a cyst, the doctor told them. About two inches long...Sshshshs...shishan...Ma whispered. In my old age I am growing a pee...a pee...a penis! (p 441).

⁹ Franco Moretti points out "space is not a container, but a condition...a constraint of history"(1998, 191).

¹⁰ Lefebvre's concept of 'rhythmanalysis' means the cyclical rhythms of spaces perceived on the bodies of inhabitants of those spaces.



Shree redefines Freud's castration complex where an aged woman feels estranged from her own body when a phallus-like cyst appears on her body. It is the growth of a foreign part in the body which creates a feeling of uncanniness. It is not the loss of the phallus but the growth of it that causes discomfort.

The uncanny is inextricably associated with dissonances, overlaps and uncertainties about sexual identities. Shree explores overlap and uncertainty in narrative genres as well as in sexual identities. Rosie, a transgender, is a close friend of eighty-year-old Ma. Rosie understands all mysteries of the body and knows the home remedies for moles, skintags and boils. She smears all kinds of pastes and massages oils on Ma's body and hair to provide her bodily strength and pleasure. Rosie is beyond any definition, "a whichbody Rosie" (p 422), her queer body arouses confusion and discomfort in others, producing an uncanny effect. Rosie's body challenges "stereotypes and definitions" and flows "this way and that" (p 423). The uncanny lies beyond explanation and outside the realm of language. Shree explains that when boundaries are crossed, a "confluence" of "man-woman mash-up" is formed like "Birju Maharaj and Kathak, Jayashankar and Sundari, Shankar and Parvati" (p 421). The union of dissimilar bodies can create magic and merge into one another. The confluence of the familiar and unfamiliar body of Rosie causes an uncanny effect on others around her. It is a body which does not repress its drives and signifies excess. Rosie *bua* becomes Raza, the tailor master, in the novel. In the presence of Rosie, Ma revives, gets to know her own body and experiences the *jouissance*. While the materiality of the body is experienced anew, the immateriality of the body is perceived too as she "pours" herself into the corners, crevices and hollows of spaces and disappears like the wind. Ma's freedom is in her ability to cross physical and geographical borders.

VII. *Tomb of Sand*: Animism as the Uncanny

In Freud's rereading of 'The Sand-Man', the automaton doll Olympia creates an intellectual uncertainty in the mind of the protagonist Nathaniel who falls in love with her. The role of the automaton in *Tomb of Sand* works to produce a familiar world unfamiliar creating the effect of uncanniness. Challenging temporal and spatial frameworks, the narrative facilitates the collaboration of humans with material objects. The narrative thrives in transposing sensory perceptions of humans onto the non-human world and vice versa. A glorious heterogeneity of sensory perceptions of sight, sound, touch, taste and smell is a part of the world of material things like the cane, the bangles, and the shoes. The cane becomes a magic wand transforming Ma into a wishing tree; the jangling and chattering bangles can sing and dance all night keeping *Beti* awake. *Beti*, the single, independent and rebellious daughter, gets caught in the rigmarole of family life when she starts taking care of her mother. The sounds of the pressure cooker, doorbell, clock, intercom and even the birds make her jittery and irritable. Familiar sounds can become strange and uncanny when a person's repressed fears get transposed onto the objects. Inanimate entities are characters in the story with agency of their own. The pair of Reebok shoes, incarnated from "a poisonous snake" (p65) in America, gives *Babu*, (daughter-in-law) the snake's courage to defy custom and become a yoga guru or a salsa dancer. Similarly, the door to Bade's house has agency since it has to remain open to visitors to keep his status as a civil servant intact. The novel also traces a larger universe beyond human language and culture. The crows vociferously argue, one of them sings as a poet and campaigns as a feminist. A crow, which is a guardian angel of Ma, has philosophic insight and can predict the future. Shree weaves a magical world where there is a borderless continuity of the self with the material world of doors, cane, bangles, and shoes along with the non-human world of

birds and trees. The readers feel an intellectual uncertainty when the living and non-living, human and non-human coalesce easily. The uncanny has to do with the strangeness of framing a border and a state of liminality.

VIII. *Tomb of Sand: The uncanny in déjà vu*

Freud's use of *déjà vu* (a French term to explain an impression that something has been previously experienced) is uncanny since it makes unfamiliar objects seem familiar. He explains that the experience of *déjà vu* corresponds to a memory or return of an unconscious fantasy. A childhood trauma which has been kept repressed and has faded from conscious memory may be expressed through this feeling of *déjà vu*. Freud narrates an anecdote where he finds himself in a red-light area while taking a stroll one summer afternoon in an unfamiliar town in Italy. Though he has never visited this place earlier, he feels it to be very familiar. He attempts to hastily move away from this place but uncannily finds himself returning to the same street over and over again. This unintentional return, this sense of familiarity with an unfamiliar place creates a sense of *Déjà vu* which cannot be explained even by Freud.

In Geetanjali Shree's novel, the strong feeling of *déjà vu* is experienced by Ma when she returns to Pakistan bringing back her repressed memories of her adolescent love affair and that of the partition. The eighty-year-old traverses the town of Lahore with agility and renewed energy as she experiences a *déjà vu*. For her, the uncanny is bound up with the sense of nostalgia, a compulsion to return to her homeland, the place of her birth and childhood. But her actual home (*Heimlich*) has become unhomely (*Unheimlich*) as the border security imprisons and interrogates the mother and daughter who were travelling without legal documents to Pakistan. In this case, the place is familiar to her since she has spent part of her early life there but the memory of this place and the people associated with it have been consciously obliterated in her later life in India. The repressed memory resurfaces by which the familiar and unfamiliar coalesce into one. Her daughter who accompanies her on her journey of self-discovery has no clue about the past life of her mother. For Beti, the mother recalling the names of people and places seems uncanny since she believes that it is Rosie's spirit which guides Ma around. Here Ma acts like Rosie's "double". Beti thinks that Rosie has hypnotised Ma so that the latter continues to live in the former.

The feeling of uncanny is associated with the gap between being and becoming, between who we are with our subconscious/unconscious desires and fears and how we conceive and represent ourselves in society. The novel starts with the old, shrivelled up, inactive and depressed widow and the rebellious, middle-aged, intellectual daughter but soon they embody each other's habits and nature. The daughter perceives herself as aged, exhausted, and imprisoned in customs and social conventions while the old woman becomes reinvigorated and free from any constraints, an incarnation of a butterfly. In other words, Beti becomes more caring towards the carefree mother. While the space of the daughter diminishes and encloses her within the house, Ma's space expands to encompass the house, the neighbourhood, the nation and the neighbouring nation (Pakistan). This is another instance of doubling in the novel. Freud explains that sometimes "a spontaneous transmission of mental processes" from one person to the other (telepathy) can make the person identify with the other. This can also cause the self to be doubled, interchanged or substituted. However, Shree explores the motif of the double to underline how the uncanny is a feeling of being at



odds with oneself, a feeling of alienation from a socially constituted self and a sense of confusion arising out of it.

IX. Conclusion

Geetanjali Shree's *Tomb of Sand* cannot be strictly defined as a fantasy novel encompassing a dream vision, a fairy tale, a myth or surreal elements. Though my paper has attempted to read her fiction through the Freudian theory of the uncanny, it does not ostensibly contain horrifying or fearful elements of 'the uncanny'. The novel can be read through the lens of Freud's uncanny since it is caught between the familiar and unfamiliar world, a real-world of partition horrors and an imaginary world of an old woman gradually turning smaller till she soars up like a "falconess" and her cane "popped" out butterflies (Shree, p700). It is an uncanny novel since it attacks the basis of our well-defined life and literature, reality and fantasy, divided into neat categorisations. Similar to Freud's essay, the novel has a transgressive function of revealing that which has remained hidden or repressed in the human psyche. The trauma suffered by women during partition is like repressed semiotic drives which, if expressed, will create havoc in society. The author has been successful in transforming a partition story of loss and pain into a light-hearted, comic and magical narrative. This novel questions the authenticity of all literary creations. The author admits

People aren't willing to believe that stories can be true. They think they're exaggerations, unrealistic, mythical. Flimsy. But actually, what isn't true are the stories that are flimsy versions of reality - which is itself considered true. (Shree, p 697).

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