

Vulnerable or/and resistant: Transgender Worlds and Constructions of Identity

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Cambridge dictionary defines ‘vulnerability’ as ‘the quality of being vulnerable (= able to be easily hurt, influenced, or attacked), or something that is vulnerable’.ⁱ Theorists with a ‘universal’ approach consider vulnerability ‘a fundamental feature of the human condition, biologically imperative and permanent...(and) connected to the personal, economic, social and cultural circumstances within which individuals find themselves at different points in their lives’.ⁱⁱ My present research has its genesis in and builds upon the contention that people can respond to vulnerability in different ways – some may recognize it and engage with it while others may ignore or deny it.ⁱⁱⁱ

The present paper studies the text entitled, *Tomb of Sand* by Geetanjali Shree which is a 2018 Hindi-language fiction titled, *Ret Samadhi* translated into English by U.S. translator, Daisy Rockwell that won the International Booker Prize in 2022. Belonging to the genre of the so-called Partition novel, *Tomb of Sand* is primarily the story of an octogenarian lady known as ‘Ma’ and her life before and after the partition of India. However, the author seamlessly and dexterously weaves into the tapestry of the novel the story of a transgender person namely, Rosie. Rosie as a small child escapes the terror of partition with the help of Ma, loses contact with her for some time and then re-unites with her post partition. It is during the course of Rosie’s frequent visits first to the house of Bade, Ma’s son

where Ma lives and then to that of Beti, Ma's daughter where Ma shifts to that the author skillfully inserts and maps the personality and all that happens with her as a 'transgender' person.

The paper examines the vicissitudes of identity vis-à-vis vulnerability of Rosie from a queer and transgender theory framework. As the author situates Rosie in 'vulnerability' of varied sorts – gender, class and so on, the paper explores how Geetanjali Shree opens up analysis and debate of issues such as invisibility, transphobia, intersectionality of identities, 'central self', the 'double bind' of gender representation and sexed body, gender fluidity and personal empowerment in context of transgenderism. Further, the paper aims to gain an insight into the manner in which the author weaves her way through the issues related to transgenderism to enter into the historically contested, complex and dynamic understanding of gender and sex as well as to present her own articulations on the questions related to the epistemology of the two.

Rosie presents a stereotypical case of a transgender person at least as concerns the initial years of her life. As is commonly seen, Rosie on being discovered a transgender baby, in all probability was rejected and thrown away by her family that landed her into an orphanage. The author mentions about Rosie's difficult beginnings of life how she runs from the orphanage to a Gurudwara and then finds shelter in the home of a Christian missionary where she receives some education. An insensitive and cruel family and society impose upon Rosie vulnerability of varied sorts and push her into a situation that is no less than a humanitarian emergency where she has to strive to fulfill the basic needs of her life and protect her rights all by herself.

Rosie spells out the 'invisibility' of transgender people like her that is imposed upon them by the society: "We aren't counted among the Muslims and Christians nor the Jews Parsis Hindus nor the men and the women, they won't take our name, won't recognize us."^{iv} "...we are impurity."^v "We are the grotesque... We've always been missing, we're forever missing..." "Who bothers about the nobodies

in society?... There are no films, no literature, no art, no clothing.... Toss me away in the lake..., and no one will notice there's one less.... We don't even exist..."^{vi}

Rosie as a transgender person shuns 'invisibility' and confronts the biased definitions and barriers of socially constructed gender and sexual identity. Be it at Ma's house, market, hospital, she makes her presence feel everywhere - for instance, at the hospital wherein Ma is admitted for surgery, Rosie executes the oft-called masculine roles of managing affairs in public sphere such as a hospital with confidence and aplomb. She gets all the paperwork done at the hospital sending off Ma with Beti to home. In dismissing Ma's request to wait for her son, Bade before they leave for home from the hospital, Rosie actually disregards and shatters the male-ego and 'son-ego' of Bade by quipping, "...What kind of Bade, dahi Bade?"^{vii} But then, on the other hand, Rosie, displays her femininity in varied ways viz. always wearing an embroidered colourful sari or shalwar-kurta or a sharara outfit; her hair coiled into a bun, her sandals, her handbag, her bangles; helping Ma buy lightweight sandals from the market, getting an abaya stitched for Ma, doing Ma's hair and providing Ma with remedies for her moles – all physical manifestations of her femininity. The author's observation about Rosie: '... a body engaged in challenging all stereotypes and definitions. A body unrecognising of the legitimacy of any borders. Flowing this way and that.'^{viii} is a powerful marker of Rosie's fluidity of gender – her sexual identity as a female is 'written on the body' clearly and visibly in the form of feminine attires and accessories allowing her sexual and social identity to be determined and defined by physical forces particularly social ones.^{ix}

Though Rosie epitomizes gender fluidity but despite all her efforts, she is unable to escape the cruel clutches of intersectionality of identities and its detrimental consequences. Though it is generally believed that transgender people face two intersectional identities namely, sex and gender but such a contention overlooks yet another intersectional identity associated with transgender community which

is of class. Shields's remark about intersectional identities is worth quoting here: "...one's identity is not just about his or her own self-identification but is also about the intersecting larger social structures and the power differentials associated with belonging to a certain group or groups".^x These intersections may be a source of oppression and/or opportunity for an individual. One such instance of oppression accruing from intersectional identities of Rosie is provided by Beti when, without any apparent or logical reason she blames Rosie for Ma's tripping over. The indictments that Beti frame in her mind for Rosie holding her responsible for Ma's fall are so far from any rationale that it is evident that Beti was waiting for some opportune moment to chide and degrade Rosie and express her long-harboured dislike for Rosie's very frequent visits to her home to be with Ma. Beti's biased attitude towards Rosie is reflected in the absurd connection that she forges between Ma's fall and Ma's and Rosie's whistling together 'with increasing frequency and tunefulness'.^{xi} No matter how modern or a woman with a broad outlook Beti projects herself to be, one cannot certainly overlook the deeper recesses of her mind and heart wherein lurks extreme disgust and detestation for Rosie not just on account of her transgenderism (she finds it difficult to decide her sex and gender – "*he-no, she-no, he-no, she-no*"^{xii}) but also owing to Rosie's poor financial status. Beti's ruminations about Rosie as she blames her for Ma's topple bear undertones of classism as well. There's a sly pun on the word 'fall' as used by Rosie carrying implications of one stooping down from one's high rank or status. This connotation becomes clear from the manner in which Beti brings into focus during the course of her soliloquy Rosie's low class and impoverished status. Beti makes repeated references to Rosie's attempts to cheat them and take advantage of their good economic bearings – how Rosie gulps down voraciously large amounts of their food in exchange for a mere sprig of mint that she gets for them, or how she misuses Ma's simplicity and generosity by bringing to her the waste material, using all of Ma's ideas and efforts in

designing the articles from the ‘rubbish’ and selling the finished goods for huge profits that she keeps all to herself.

Rosie, as a ‘queer’ is ‘at odds with the heteronormative, dominant schema and thus rebels against, or “queers,” these kinds of essentialist views by proposing that gender roles, gender identity, and sexual orientations are social constructs and therefore, open to questioning, subversion, and self-construction’.^{xiii} Rosie, indeed, questions, subverts, and self-constructs. She brushes aside the age-old assumptions and conventions associated with transgender community and aims to define the ‘central self’ on and by her own. She dabbles in various occupations like sewing, embroidery, making all sorts of handicrafts, preparing jam jelly chutney, and sending tiffins for workers. To augment her income, she buys a flat near the lake and rents it out. Rosie creates a charity organization for the welfare of trans people like her. She neither begs nor agrees to reduce herself to a prostitute. Instead, she opts to work hard and earn her livelihood in the most decent way possible. In doing so, she exudes immense creativity and enterprise and most importantly, self-confidence, dignity and again, ‘visibility’.

Further, never does Rosie betray any sign of hesitancy or embarrassment in facing the world that are conventionally the characteristics of transgender people. Nothing seems to crush her high spirits and she makes sure that she infuses that same energy in the low and depressed Ma. Rosie vigorously attempts to revive life into Ma after her husband’s demise by infusing the same kind of unconventionality in her – she gets the abaya stitched for Ma, takes Ma to Saturday market to buy lightweight sandals and so on. If she overthrows stereotypical behavior associated with transgender people then she encourages Ma too to write off the age-old societal ways of thinking and living of the ageing. A cisgender person like Beti, Ma’s daughter who is otherwise an outgoing and rebellious woman feels diffident and overshadowed by the overpowering personality of a transgender person like Rosie. Beti watches Ma being driven by Rosie to the market and wearing new types of clothes and applying mehndi in

hair and garlic to her moles – all of Rosie’s ideas, she can do nothing but gasp at the fact that “D(d)aily (there is) a new beginning”^{xiv} and wonder helplessly “...will anything be in my control anymore.”^{xv}

Rosie’s towering persona over Beti or Bade representatives of societal hegemony and heteronormativity is a reflection of Hird’s contestation: “Queer theory presumes that transgressing boundaries will subvert, and eventually dismantle, hierarchies based on sex and gender. But subversion can lead to unanticipated outcomes that may not be transgressive at all.”^{xvi} Rosie, in all actuality is in the process of self-construction resisting the illusion of a self that has its origin in the social norms and conventions and societal acceptance. In place of letting her ‘central self’ being mapped onto her by external factors as societal rules and societal acceptance, she questions her own personal identity – a position that can lead one to either self-empowerment or self-confinement.^{xvii}

Rosie makes a case of *transphobia*, a phenomenon associated closely with every trans person. Transphobia is not merely the fear of trans people but it also includes ‘any negative attitudes (hatred, loathing, rage, or moral indignation) towards trans people on the basis of our enactments of gender’.^{xviii} Geetanjali Shree, the author brings in a very important facet closely associated with transgender people and with *transphobia* viz. deceit and sham by introducing in the story Raza tailor who frequents Beti’s home and is a continual source of confusion for Beti who is unable to make out if Rosie and Raza are one person or different. Beti continuously suspects Rosie’s gender identity and at times, heaves upon her the blame of deception. In the essay, *Evil Deceivers and make-believers*, Talia Mae Bettcher has delved deep into the rhetoric of deception that contributes greatly to transphobic hostility and to either justify or excuse violence against trans people: ‘...the deceiver representation (with its related identity enforcement) in and of itself constitutes considerable emotional violence against transpeople through its impeachment of moral integrity and denials of authenticity’.^{xix} Trans people have very often been victimized as deceivers or pretenders whether on the basis of their

genitalia or appearance or behavior. Talia also gives the concept of a 'double bind' which results from the contrast between gender presentation and sexed body^{xx}. According to Talia, the two sides of the 'double bind' are one, visibility or disclosure which represents trans person as pretentious or playing dress up and two, invisibility wherein trans person exposes one's actual self. Rosie too is caught up in this trap when she is labeled as an imposter for making her appearance first as a woman and then as a man: "faker (who) had no proper papers (of the rented flat)..., (who) cheated (them)"^{xxi} are the remarks of the tenants of Rosie who mercilessly castigate Rosie as a criminal who was least worthy of trust or respect in society. Rosie's attempts to earn a living buying and renting out a flat which actually speaks of her urge and efforts towards earning a respectable livelihood are not only brushed aside but also turned and twisted to victimize her. Rosie is accused of renting out a flat which has ceiling that was leaking and walls around that were so low in height that guaranteed no privacy to the tenants. The charges levelled by tenants against Rosie were pretexts when, in actuality, tenants wanted to force her to sign the legal documents by which Rosie, upon her death is succeeded by them as the owner of the house. Rosie, who had no mind to give up on her property was killed brutally by the tenants and her corpse was found '(i)n a box. In the iron mortar in the kitchen they found a pestle covered with the same blood that splattered the wall like paan spit. Stuffed in with some shards of shattered rotting skull'.^{xxii}

With the confusion surrounding the identity of Raza tailor in the story, Geetanjali Shree enters into this historically contested, complex and dynamic understanding of gender and sex. In the article, *Patterned Fluidities*, Richardson traces the historical development of the epistemology of sex and gender since the late 19th century and concludes that the link between the two has reached to the point where it is 'not determinate or unidirectional, but complex, dynamic, contingent, fluid, and unstable'.^{xxiii} Geetanjali Shree, through the characters of Beti, the inspector and the tenants of Rosie who continuously suspect and feel

confused about the identity of Rosie and Raza presents her own ideology about the long-standing issue of sex and gender. Beti observes that when she hears voices and thinks it to be Rosie's, she finds Raza and then when she is sure that is Raza's, it turns out to be Rosie's. The author keeps the question regarding Rosie and Raza being one person or not quite unclear thereby reinforcing Richardson's comparison between sex and gender to a shoreline. The identities of Rosie and Raza seem to be as blurry as sex and gender the interconnections between which are a 'a moving multilayered process with shifting interfaces that often 'mess up' established levels of social analysis'.^{xxiv}

However, the author extends the understanding of epistemology of sex and gender and positions it within the widespread social phenomena. As Beti ruminates over the dichotomy of Rosie's identity, she likens it to a river that flows in both the directions. But she finds a similar unpredictability in the personality of her lover too. KK, she finds, is seen sometimes sitting with Rosie and Ma and at other times, with Raza and Ma. Irony and unexpectedness pervade Raza's actions also who is fond of booze and is able to procure it even on dry days. Furthermore, Ma eludes coherence and intelligibility as she, who is averse to lemon honey brandy partakes of booze in the company of KK and Raza. The author thus seems to imply that it is not merely the understandings of sex and gender that are open to questioning and that are subject to change and reconstruction. Such processes of blurring of boundaries, deconstruction and exploration are all-pervasive and are an inextricable part of the warp and woof of various aspects of the society.

The author recognizing the denial of fixity, stability and determinacy of almost every facet of life from sex and gender to relationships to one's preferences to selfhood stresses upon in a rhetorical manner the oneness, the universality and the transcending of opposites and diversities - "Is there one voice? Or do we all have one voice, which comes out feminine for a feminine body and masculine for a masculine body? Some femininity, some masculinity."^{xxv}

The author accepts the overlapping nature and mysteriousness of each of the afore-mentioned phenomena and finds their understanding to be delimited by varied factors. The manifestations of these phenomena may vary but their basic origin is the same. This transcendence as well as inconsequentiality of the aspects of sex, class, religion and so on and their roots remaining one – humanity - is reinforced by the author in the way Rosie’s life is concluded in the novel – ‘Rosie bequeathed her deceased body to the hospital for medical research... and it was no less than a legal bequest...This was Rosie’s last rite. Religious rites were thus absent.’^{xxvi} By such a humanitarian act, Rosie sets herself free from the classifications of cisgender and transgender person/community. Ironically, the body that is the source of condemnation, confusion and contestation throughout Rosie’s life and the body that is treated with utter disrespect bearing a toe tag with corpse number on it (called as ‘a price tag...cheap’^{xxvii} by the author) and as nothing less than filth by the hospital after Rosie’s death becomes the very epitome of service, of humanity and of dilution of differences of sex, gender, class or religion emphasizing not the physical but the essence. Rosie’s act of bequeathing her dead remains for the larger good of society changes the equation from that of cisgender people vs transgender people to human beings vs human beings that echoes the words of Bornstein, an American non-binary transactivist and author: “...you still think gender is the issue! Gender is not the issue. Gender is the battlefield. Or the playground. The issue is us versus them. Any us versus any them...”^{xxviii}

Works cited

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^{iv} Shree, Geetanjali (trans. From Hindi by Daisy Rockwell), *Tomb of Sand*, New Delhi: Thomson Press India Ltd, 2022. P. 481

^v Ibid p. 481

^{vi} Ibid p. 483-484

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- viii Ibid p.423
- ix J.L. Nagoshi et al., *Gender and Sexual Identity: Transcending Feminist and Queer Theory*, New York: Springer, 2014 p.
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- xxv Shree, Geetanjali. *Tomb of Sand*. p.462
- xxvi Ibid p. 511
- xxvii Ibid p. 508
- xxviii J.L. Nagoshi, *Gender and Sexual Identity: Transcending Feminist and Queer Theory*. p. 76
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