

## **Echoes of Alienation and Politics of Communal Segregation as Reflected in Geetanjali Shree's *Imagination***

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**Abstract.** The paper titled “Echoes of Alienation and Politics of Communal Segregation as Reflected in Geetanjali Shree’s *Imagination*”, seeks to explore the thought process of Geetanjali Shree in the context of India in all its shades. It also examines that Geetanjali Shree has been making judgements on India of yore and the contemporary India which is a bundle of contradictions when seen against the backdrop of history. The two novels *Mai* and *Hamara Shahar Us Baras* represents two different shades of thoughts about the evolving nature of a country where everything is determined by politics. So, in a way the paper analyses the socio-political pros and cons and its changing face. The two novels portray different conditions about a country which has been very inconsistent in terms of its response to how the country has conducted itself politically. One of the concerns is to examine how Geetanjali Shree manifested the very pursuit of identity and the rise of certain tendencies which reflect the dynamics of a changing society.

**Keywords :** Alienation; imagination; gender; patriarchy; identity

Geetanjali Shree’s artistic milieu revolves around the politics of segregation, communal divide the changing face of India and how there is a political transition from a sedate to turbulent India. Geetanjali Shree’s is manifested in her blurry imagination as she stands on a high podium of political judgement and the gradual rise of sectarian predilections in the context of what she visualizes India to be and how India has moved about as a nation in terms of ideas that have kept the country on tenterhooks. She creates stories from around the issues rooted into a complex psychology of understanding the ethos of a nation crumbling under the duress of social features provides the base line to her art as she keeps moving around Partition, its aftermath and India both the secular and communal. She also writes social stories including a conservative patriarchal structure and voices of dissent against it as reflected in *Mai*

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and the political chaos in *Hamara Shahar Us Baras* which catches contemporary whispers about a nation that has been a great votary of democratic values.

Her novels basically are representations of the diverse and pluralist Indian society where cracks are induced by politics to extend that social relationship, its values and its spirit tend to be marred by what is happening in recent times. She has stories to tell but those stories are not without a comment on social-political behaviours of the contemporary India. We have seen in novels like *Mai*, *Hamara Shahar Us Baras* and *Ret Samadhi* that she comes hard on forces which are stubborn to hold India hostage to their political design. These sentiments echo widely and aggressively the concern of an artist who is desperate to uphold the democratic tradition which is in shreds. Her issues are the issues that every country faces including the assault of time and the assault of politics which tend to vilify the great value of coalescence. When relationship between communities breaks and when the divide becomes apparent it is where the crisis creeps in and it is here only that politics finds space to make its way. Her imagination is more under stress as she thinks that the nation may totter or crumble if the temper of politics remains the same. It's like piercing through the dense fog where the light dwindles and visibility of everything is enveloped by its onrushing disgrace. Against this backdrop she writes most of her novels whether it is the blemish of Partition or the demolition of Babri Masjid or the collapse of social relationship, she keeps moving around these peripheries in a variety of ways.

Talking about her debut novel *Mai*, falls in the traditional category of a novel which talks about a society which is pre-eminently patriarchal and with it there is a whole set of values which are generally connected to patriarchal structure. Mai is at the centre of the whole drama apparently insignificant as there was the ultimate influence of Dada on the whole family and without his nod nothing would be acceptable even in the management of day-to-day affairs. In this cramped space Mai is suffocated but the onus of holding all wires together rests on her without the liberty to make things happen on her own. In the constricted troubled atmosphere where women would not even parade before the impish and whimsical mental frames of men not willing to offer any space for the free breath of a woman. Here Geetanjali Shree in the novel portrays certain social malices and voices of the northern Indian society which stifle,

belittle and stop them from developing individuality of women in a conservative setup where men are God on earth. In the novel *Mai* Geetanjali Shree documents a family where there is a perplexing narrative of patriarchy, where women remain directly under the influence of those orthodox men who believe that women have no role in upholding the value system which family creates.

Geetanjali Shree knew the northern society and the toxic psyche of patriarchy and in the process of writing this novel she finds many spots of bother particularly in the context of women existence and their freedom. Here in this context, we find Geetanjali Shree making some forays into a seemingly value ridden society whose contradiction was explained by the apparent nature of patriarchal long handle. In *Mai* Geetanjali Shree could find manifestation of what happens to a woman where men suffer from chauvinism and that the quoted statement confirms that women look better under the duress of kitchen flames. This manufactured system of fixing the importance of women also was left to men who in their prejudicial representation of women tend to completely undermine the role of women in the construction of family. *Mai* remains a traditional entity as defined by Dada and she is a model of compliance early on in the novel. This is a condition that most women suffer from in an orthodox structure. Dada's influence remains decisive, he calls shots, determines values and decides individualism of women.

*Mai* remains a novel in the category of women who were either short on the courage to say no to excesses of patriarchy because they were happy with the given status as even Dadi is insubordination to Dada and the rest were a bunch of individuals who were tamed. So, what we see Geetanjali Shree doing in this novel is to study a society from northern India where the marginalization of woman was a common sight. She expresses the subdued timid responses of a woman to the patriarchal challenges which finally prevail in the early parts of the novel but she has given enough indications that society is evolving, it does not remain stable as we could see that in the later part of the novel when generation next takes over particularly patriarchy dwindles and the girls of the generation next not only challenges the old value system but also reject with impunity what was at one point considered impossible. *Mai* is a progressive novel as it deals with both orthodoxies, superstitions, sovereigntism, and gradual disintegration of men's power in the same society:

Dadi used to say that mai had only one virtue—her parda. That was the parda that made us cry. Whatever may happen and come to pass, parda was inexcusable. Indefensible. And dadi accepted as much, in a bitter voice ‘why, parda today is the name only of that thing which is hung on doors and windows.’(19)

The quoted passage is an emblem of a thought that society is not a fixed formula as it keeps on evolving with the passage of time and the value system remains vulnerable to transition as here, we see that Dadi lamenting what she considers to be a value so disdainfully rejected by the generation next. What she rues is the old fashioned parda which was for her a lofty ideal and a kind of a scared commitment to uphold parda. The same *purdah* system is now not a value any longer as she sarcastically says that the parda is something to be hung on the wall. The transition is so evident that Dadi only minces words. This transition is brought by time which is the most powerful constituent in any structure. Geetanjali Shree moves with waves of the time and the waves are never consistent in the sense that what is relevant today will not be so at a later date. This is to suggest that time rolls on with different narratives and in those narratives are born conflicting patterns of thought process.

Geetanjali Shree is not only a novelist who talks about social issues but also looks into the politics of the day to make it more contemporary and relevant. Ideologically she stands on a secular pedestal with a commitment to art that is only about evaluating what art demands. Art is not about an alignment with political philosophies and expressions of personal likes and dislikes but it only examines the truth which is at times injured and left crying. Varsha Tiwari writes:

Geetanjali Shree’s second Hindi novel, *Hamara Shahar Us Baras*; 1998; in Daisy Rockwell’s translation, *Our City That Year* (India Hamish Hamilton, August 2024); brings to world literature an amazingly specific yet uncannily universal story that is all the more relevant today. The novel is a marvellously nuanced study of the ways in which chest thumping communal discourses insinuate into our personal spaces.

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The best of us get pitted into camps and normalise the corrosion of our own souls. The novel brings out the self-estrangement of the protagonists as their polyvalent identities mutate from something organic, changeable and fragrant like a madhumalati vine into an unyielding, deterministic and arbitrary category like community, class, religion. (Internet)

As Versha Tiwari feels that the lived universality about the relationship between the two communities was on the threshold of communal divide. Hanif and Shruti are the embodiments of the great cultural heritage who sense that politics of hate is beginning to take forms. They think that this is something which is orchestrated for political motives but they have the potential in them to ignite the flame of hate. And this hate is going to be a part of Indian politics as political powers flow from the barrel of gun rather than philosophical and ideological commitments.

The novel *Hamara Shahar Us Baras* has too many issues within its fold. With focus on the Hindu- Muslim divide that was beginning to take ugly form as the rise of Hindu fundamentalist organisations under the patronage of political parties were fomenting troubles for the nation. The nature of this trouble has its genesis in the 1990s when there was a fanatic cry to decimate the structure in Ayodhya that was Babri Masjid. Geetanjali Shree in this novel builds up a host of relationship between Hindus and Muslims, the secular and the communal and the leadership being fragile in checking the rise of sectarian proclivity. So, the novel has a clear context of cataclysmic divide between politics and society. Tarun K. Saint writes :

Shree's knack of providing fresh perspectives on socio-historical events is evident again, albeit in a novel written two decades ago. While not as stylistically innovative as *Tomb of Sand*, this narrative about the rise of Hindu fundamentalism in the 1990s and the impact of the ideology on personal relations within a family living in a mofussil town in central India carries a definite punch. (Internet)

Geetanjali Shree is an artist who is on a balancing beam who has a stance on matters of literary judgements by envisaging a vision of time, culture and politics. She is not a political writer which this novel *Hamara Shahar Us Baras* (Our City That Year) might make her appear so as she is discussing something that India was going through on the emergence of certain forces with a religious hoopla and something that has signs of issuing tocsin to the democratic history of India and its secular fabric. The novel also seeks to explore the rise of certain fundamentalist tendencies that were uncommon in India and the growth of the sentiment that was beginning to be dangerous in the context of a country which had held the highest podium of secular values. 1990s was a period when there was certain organisation who were pushing the contention that there was a masjid called Babri Masjid that was built by the Mughal emperor on the ruins of Ram Temple or they went as far as saying that where Babri Masjid stood was the birth place of Lord Rama. The contention gained currency gradually and became more intense after the recommendations of Mandal commission. That indeed was a period marred by political slogans, mobilisation of mass sentiments and consolidation of communal forces with VHP being to the forefront of the so-called religious movement. It was bizarre for a country like India which symbolised tolerance, secularism and faiths were at the highest honour. On the other hand, Muslims too created a Babri Masjid coordination committee as an act of defence against the frenzy of fundamentalists organisations.

Against this backdrop the novel emerges to remind the nation that India had witnessed something unprecedented which had besmirched its history and the cultural chasm became conveniently conspicuous. That was India disgraced and again that was India left in the throes of a religious crisis. What Geetanjali Shree does in this novel is to suggest the ruptures that came about in a country of diverse races which left it permanently injured. She takes no sides nor has political stances on something that demanded a thorough rejection of communal tendencies which eventually led to the resurgence of Hindu fundamentalism. New definitions of nationalism kept pouring in, majoritarianism perhaps became the phrase of the day and there was beginning to be a new consciousness in terms of religious identities. India the secular was well on its way to India the communal.

We can see that the two novels represent two ideological strands, one about the rule of patriarchy and its subsequent disintegration with

the advancement of education and women empowerment. Women empowerment triggers of the collapse of patriarchy or it seems to be on the wane. So, in the novel Geetanjali Shree traces the reason for the growth of a sensibility which eventually tame patriarchal constructs of the society. We can see further that *Mai* is a novel which is based on the influence of patriarchy and the way it gets dissolved in the course of time following a social transition. While the second novel *Hamara Shahar Us Baras* is about the political upheaval and talks about how there was a shift in politics. Geetanjali Shree is very quick to understand that India was on the threshold of a possible rupture and the emergence of radicalism, gained currency to alter the political course, ushering in a new season of turbulence. So, what we have seen in the two novels is the divergent concerns of Geetanjali Shree as an artist and her ability to write history without biases.

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