

A Reading into the Cultural and Social Dimensions of  
the Sacred and the Profane in Geetanjali Shree's *Tomb  
of Sand* (2023)

قراءة في الأبعاد الثقافية والاجتماعية للمقدس والوثني في "قبر الرمل"  
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**Abstract:** In the socio-cultural milieu of contemporary India, women grapple with systemic injustices that perpetuate gender-based violence and discrimination. Geetanjali Shree's novel *Tomb of Sand* (2022) provides a poignant lens through which we examine the complexities of women's experiences. This study critically analyzes the portrayal of women within the sacred and the profane, shedding light on their struggles. Employing a qualitative methodology, the study scrutinizes the complex social and cultural interplays at work, leveraging gender assumptions to elucidate the author's dystopian articulation of the plight of Indian women. Through this lens, the paper engages also with Durkheimian theoretical perspectives to offer a critical examination of the text's portrayal of women oppression.

**Keywords:** Cultural Critique, Durkheimian Assumptions, Gender Dynamics, Indian Women, Profane, Sacred.

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**ملخص:**

تهدف هذه الورقة إلى استكشاف الاضطهاد الممنهج الذي تعاني منه النساء ضمن السياق الثقافي الاجتماعي في الهند، حيث تقدم دراسة لثنائية المقدس - الوثني و دورهما في تصوير الشخصيات النسائية على أنها تجسيدات للإرادة الإلهية، وكذلك كأفراد محاصرين ضمن تراكيب اجتماعية قمعية تستمر في إذكاء العنف والتمييز القائم على الجندر. تسعى هذه الورقة، أيضاً، إلى توضيح الطريقة التي تناولتها رواية جيتانجالي شري "قبر الرمل" (2022) لدراسة تمثيل المقدس والوثني في التجارب الإنسانية. تم استخدام منهجية البحث النوعي لدراسة التفاعلات والتراكيب الاجتماعية والثقافية المعقدة وتحليلها استناداً إلى افتراضات النوع الاجتماعي لتوضيح تعبير التجارب الدرامية للنساء الهنديات. من خلال هذا المنظور، تتناول الورقة، أيضاً، نظرية إ. دوركايم لتقديم دراسة نقدية لتصوير رواية جيتانجالي شري للأنوثة

الكلمات المفتاحية: المقدس الوثني؛ نساء هنديات؛ ديناميكيات الجندر؛ نقد ثقافي؛ افتراضات دوركايم

**1. Introduction**

In Geetanjali Shree's *Tomb of Sand* (2023), an intricate articulation of feminist narratives is seamlessly integrated with socio-cultural discourse, alongside with a critical examination of the affluent middle-class Indian joint family structure. The novel foregrounds the deconstruction of both tangible and metaphorical barriers that delineate gender, imagination, reality, and national identity. Marked by its unique narrative style, the novel exhibits notable comedic elements, facets often overlooked in Indian literary discourse but prominently featured in Shree's body of work (Aggarwal & Naik, 2022, p. 1735). The story exposes the harsh truths of patriarchy, casteism, and communalism in Indian society. These societal issues continue to plague the community and Indian women in particular. Through the portrayal of her female characters, Shree elucidates the myriad ways in which Indian women are marginalized, oppressed, and deprived of agency. The traditional perception of women as enigmatic and inscrutable has contributed to their subjugation within social hierarchies. This misleading perception further perpetuates the ideology of their indivisibility or what Purabi Goswami (2022) identifies as the *unknowability* of women (21). Such characterization has been deemed integral to the construct of femininity, enhancing women's allure to men and positing the conquest of women as a masculine victory.

This paper starts with a brief overview of the ideas of the sacred and the profane and how they relate to women's suffering in Geetanjali Shree's *Tomb of Sand*. It looks into and women's experiences, especially how their suffering is connected to the sacred and profane

practices. The sacred includes those practices which are seen as holy, pure, or divine, while the profane is viewed as worldly, impure, or low. The this nuanced theorization of both notions, this paper seeks also to find out how these ideas are shown in the novel and their connection to the women characters' experiences. It, thus, attempts to offer an insight into how the sacred and profane relate to women's suffering experiences. By analyzing these themes, the study highlights how social norms and expectations can oppress and marginalize women.

A number of works turn a significant attention to Geetanjali Shree's *Tomb of Sand* including: Gupta (2023) brings a postcolonial perspective to the fore, examining the intricate politics of the Indian Partition as depicted in both Urvashi Butalia's *The Other Side of Silence* and Geetanjali Shree's *Tomb of Sand*. This analysis reveals how these narratives unearth silenced histories and personal tales within the broader political landscape. Complementarily, Kirtikar's *Saraswati's Inkpot* (2023) probes into memory, the body, and national identity in the literature of Indian women, including Shree's work. These scholarly efforts collectively underline the significance of Geetanjali Shree's *Tomb of Sand* in contemporary literature and postcolonial studies, showcasing Shree's innovative narrative techniques with animals and birds as sidekicks, thereby offering a unique lens on interconnectedness and human experiences amidst the backdrop of women's oppression.

Incorporating Haney's statement (2012) that the legacy of dependent citizenship has engendered a "bodies politic," thereby perpetuating a system of impunity for gendered violence, is crucial for rethinking the Cultural and Social Dimensions of Women Oppression. This perspective underscores the urgency of reevaluating femininity in the contemporary socio-political context. Haney's critique highlights how entrenched systems of oppression continue to shape and limit the possibilities for reimagining femininity, emphasizing the need for a transformative approach that challenges these historical and systemic barriers. (239)

The notion of the sacred seemingly constitutes an intrinsic attribute intricately entwined with the profane. This intimates a profound interconnectedness between the sacred and the profane and conjecture a comprehensive grasp of one is indispensable for a full understanding of the other. This knowledge enables individuals to discern the presence

of the sacred amidst the profane, acknowledging the significance of both in the formulation of people's experiences and interactions. Through such comprehension, a more profound appreciation for the intricate dynamics between the sacred and the profane allows elucidating their pivotal influence in sculpting our societal and cultural paradigms.

## **2. Durkheim's Dialectic Assumption on the Sacred and the Profane**

In the scholarly discourse on the dichotomy of the sacred and the profane, Durkheim posits these concepts as emanations of collective human experience and the very fabric of society itself. He argues that the sacred does not reside as a static or inherent attribute within objects or notions; rather, it is forged through the intricate web of social interactions and processes, as he elucidates,

Sacred things are those whose representation society itself has fashioned; it includes all sorts of collective states, common traditions and emotions, feelings which have a relationship to objects of general interest, etc.; and all those elements are combined according to the appropriate laws of social mentality. (Durkheim, 95)

Through this lens, Durkheim identifies the sacred as inherently linked to collective states, traditions, emotions, and sentiments shared among the social members. These shared experiences foster a sense of communal identity and purpose, often manifested through objects or symbols endowed with specific social and cultural meanings. Furthermore, Durkheim contrasts this with his conceptualization of the profane, which he perceives as antithetical to the sacred. According to Durkheim, the profane emanates from individual sensory data and experiences, distinct from the collective social fabric that constructs the sacred. He asserts:

Profane things, conversely, are those which each of us constructs from our own sense data and experience; the ideas we have of them have as their subject matter unadulterated, individual impressions, and that is why they do not have the same prestige in our eyes as the preceding ones. (Durkheim, 1994, p.95)

At this point, Durkheim suggests that the profane is derived from individual perceptions and experiences. For instance, an ordinary piece of furniture may be perceived as profane due to its lack of significant meaning beyond its utilitarian function. The understanding of such an object is solely predicated upon personal interactions with it.

Given its foundation in individual experiences, the profane is the devoid of the collective esteem or value attributed to the sacred. Contrary to the communal significance imbued in the sacred, the profane is characterized as ordinary and devoid of value beyond its immediate practical application. Shree (2023) writes: “Bade cautioned Ma against talking to Beti too much on the phone and so on, and you’re not to go there under any circumstances; we cannot legitimate her lifestyle”. (65).

This nuanced examination of the sacred and profane, as delineated by Durkheim, offers a pivotal framework for understanding their roles in shaping perception of social and cultural experiences. This analytical lens becomes particularly salient when applied to the exploration of gender dynamics within specific cultural contexts in Geetanjali Shree’s *Tomb of Sand*. In this seminal work, the intricate interplay between the sacred and the profane is not only a backdrop against which the narrative unfolds but also a critical element in the construction and deconstruction of women oppression within the socio-cultural milieu.

The application of Durkheim's theoretical constructs to the analysis of Shree’s narrative facilitates a deeper understanding of how femininity is both revered and reviled, oscillating between the sacred and the profane. This oscillation is emblematic of the broader societal and cultural tensions surrounding women's roles and identities. In *Tomb of Sand*, the protagonist's journey can be seen as a metaphorical traversal through spaces deemed sacred and profane, thereby challenging and redefining traditional notions of femininity. The narrative employs these concepts to critique the dichotomous perceptions of women, showcasing how these perceptions are socially constructed and maintained through collective consciousness.

Furthermore, the text serves as a poignant critique of the ways in which societal norms and traditions contribute to the marginalization of women by confining them to roles and spaces that are either excessively idealized (sacred) or undervalued (profane). By Shree contrasts the sacred and the profane within female experiences, exposing their artificial nature. She demonstrates how these constructs help perpetuate gender inequalities. The novel underscores the fluidity of these concepts and their impact on individual identity formation and societal interaction.

The critical examination of gender roles delves into the oppression of women and explores broader themes. It considers Durkheim's theories on collective identity and social cohesion. The exploration of sacred and profane elements within the novel elucidates the complex ways in which cultural narratives and symbols shape collective identities, particularly in relation to gender. (Chang, 24) This scholarly inquiry into Shree's work reveals the potential for literary narratives to challenge and reshape our understanding of the sacred and profane, thereby contributing to the ongoing discourse on gender, culture, and society.

Ultimately, this extended analysis underscores the significance of Durkheim's framework in dissecting the nuanced portrayals of femininity within literary works, offering profound insights into the interstices of cultural, social, and gender studies. Women oppression not only enriches our comprehension of the sacred and profane as theoretical constructs but also highlights their practical implications in critiquing and redefining societal norms related to gender.

### **3. Gender and Cultural Reflections**

In the discourse of gender and cultural studies, the concepts of "sacred" and "profane" transcend mere religious connotations and permeate social norms and values. These categories reflect the deep-seated beliefs of a culture, shaping perceptions of what is revered and what is disregarded. The ideology encompassing the sacred and the profane informs the attributes and behaviours that are taught, lived, and worked within by both men and women. Yet, their interpretation is not monolithic; it varies within the context of individual and collective experiences. Broad cultural expectations regarding what is sacred or profane may appear consistent but are not etched in stone across the members of a society. Local influences and personal experiences intercede, suggesting fluidity within these categories (Keller, 1995, p. xv).

Keller's reflection offers a scaffold for a more understanding of gender roles within cultural frameworks. The sacred, often aligned with societal esteem and veneration, can ascribe higher value to certain gender-specific roles, influencing both individual identity and occupational status. The profane, marked as ordinary or even contemptible, is relegated to a lesser status, which may disproportionately affect the labor and societal positioning of the gender associated with such roles. This cultural categorization bears significant implications for gender dynamics in the workplace, impacting everything from job accessibility to wage equity (Thomas, 2006, p. 181).

A comprehensive examination of these gendered cultural reflections must also consider the distribution of material resources and personal assistance services, which are often allocated along the lines of sacred and profane gender roles. This allocation process, reflecting deeper societal structures and values, plays a pivotal role in determining the autonomy and standard of living for different genders. Thereby, these theoretical explorations must grapple with the macroeconomic systems that perpetuate or challenge these gendered categorizations, scrutinizing their role in sustaining or undermining disparities (Thomas, 2006, p. 181).

In conjunction with these socioeconomic considerations, sociocultural perspectives distinguish between biological sex and gender, the latter being a complex tapestry woven from cultural threads. This distinction acknowledges the potential for flexibility and transformation in gender roles, in contrast to the relative fixity of biological sex. The cultural construction of gender implies that gender roles and expectations are mutable, opening pathways for societal change and progression toward gender equity (Freed, 2003, p. 23).

Thus, the interplay of gender and culture, through the lens of the sacred and the profane, is essential in dissecting and understanding the dynamics at play in shaping gender roles and their associated values within society. This extended discussion is crucial not only in academic theorization but also in practical applications, as it can inform policies and interventions aimed at fostering a more just and equitable social landscape for all genders.

#### **4. The Sacred Image of Patriarchal Roles in Geetanjali Shree's Tomb of Sand**

In the realm of Indian literature, the concept of the sacred occupies a central role, a theme poignantly explored in Geetanjali Shree's novel, where it predominantly emerges as a source of women's suffering. Through the narrative arcs of various characters, Shree delves into the mechanisms by which the sacred is instrumentalized to exert dominance and control over women. In this context, Rakoczy, (2004) presents a critical analysis, stating,

When religious language is used to justify these patriarchal structures of oppression which are inherently violent because they violate women's human dignity, the circle is complete. Use of God language to defend the oppression of women, 'this is God's will', traps women of faith. Can God truly

will this violence? Many women accept what they are told passively and obediently, and thus it takes a strong woman to look out of her prison and say 'no'. (31)

This critique underscores the debate surrounding the sacred and its impact on women in India, highlighting the urgent need for a reevaluation of the role of religion in perpetuating gender disparities.

The discourse on the sacred and its implications for women in India catalyzes a broader examination of the social positioning of women within inherently patriarchal societies, the nexus of culture and power within religious contexts, and the avenues through which women navigate and assert their place in society. Religious institutions such as Hinduism, Christianity, and Islam, as noted by George (2008), underpin many of the patriarchal ideologies prevalent in India, posing significant challenges to gender equality and exerting a profound emotional toll on women and other marginalized groups (21).

The text highlights the significant role of religious beliefs in shaping individual perceptions and their effects on health outcomes. It emphasizes the complex influence these beliefs have on personal health narratives. While Najem (2021) points to the comfort and support religious practices provide, the darker side of these beliefs can compound the emotional turmoil for those struggling with illness. The interpretation of illness as a divine retribution or trial not only complicates personal grief but also societal stigma towards those suffering, impacting their mental health and social standing. This duality underscores the intricate relationship between faith, health, and societal norms, suggesting a nuanced field of study in understanding and supporting individuals' coping mechanisms in the face of illness.

Shree's narrative positions the sacred as a catalyst for suffering, particularly through the character of Ma, who is raised in a Brahmin family with stringent adherence to religious traditions and customs. Her experiences underscore the emotional turmoil and conflict stemming from unwavering loyalty to these sacred beliefs. Ma's journey, alongside Maya's, serves as a poignant critique of the societal pressures to conform to prescribed gender roles and expectations, illustrating the tension between individual agency and familial duty. The novel also addresses the perpetuation of gender-based violence and discrimination under the guise of upholding sacred norms. Shree illustrates how traditional beliefs and customs can suppress personal autonomy and self-expression, highlighting the ethical dilemmas



posed by gender inequality, such as the disparate allocation of resources like food based on gender. Shree (2023) writes:

She [Ma] pointed out that men always get the high-quality dal and women just get leftover mash, don't they? Hmm? She spoke fearlessly. So? So does that make it right? But if you stare at them fearlessly, will the border guards understand? You have crossed the border, they reprimand.( 14)

Furthermore, Shree explores the legitimization of gendered violence through religious and patriarchal narratives, emphasizing the complex interplay between religious moralization and the support of gender violence through patriarchal interpretations (McPhillips & Page, p. 159). The depiction of Ma and other female characters in *Tomb of Sand* unveils the multifaceted forms of violence and oppression women face, symbolizing the precarious nature of women's existence within a patriarchal framework. Geetanjali Shree's *Tomb of Sand* offers a critical lens through which to examine the sacred image of patriarchy, revealing the intricate ways in which the sacred is implicated in the reinforcement of gender inequalities and the oppression of women in India. The novel not only critiques these dynamics but also serves as a metaphor for the fragility of women's lives amidst the shifting sands of patriarchal power and violence.

### **5. Geetanjali Shree's Underlying Critiques to Profane Constructs of Patriarchy**

Geetanjali Shree's *Tomb of Sand* significantly engages with the concept of the profane within the human condition, centralizing its narrative around the experiential realities of women in a rural setting, thereby delving into the complexities of desire, sexuality, and mortality. The narrative articulates the profane through the prism of interpersonal relationships, especially those involving women, as they navigate their societal roles, desires, and sexual identities. In this literary work, sexuality is portrayed as an intrinsic element of human nature, approached with both explicitness and defiance. The novel further explores the profane in the context of death, portraying it as an unavoidable reality devoid of inherent meaning, contrasting with sacred interpretations that view death as a spiritually significant transformation (Smith, 2003, p. 306). Shree challenges conventional societal norms by presenting a nuanced exploration of human experience that encompasses both the sacred

and the profane, highlighting the profane as a source of oppression for the character Ma, whose life is circumscribed by societal expectations. The portrayal of Ma's experiences with desire and sexuality as profane elements within her community underscores the broader theme of oppression.

The narrative situates Indian women within a discourse of oppression and hardship, linking their suffering to their relegation to profane spaces, where their bodies are stigmatized as impure and shameful (Kapur, 2010, 32). Shree's work illustrates the domestic and feminine realms as sites of profanation, where women's engagement in household tasks is demeaned, contributing to a gendered division of labor that reinforces traditional gender roles and perpetuates gender inequality by restricting women's access to education, employment, and political empowerment (Sen, 2019, p. 47). The cultural and social construction of women's bodies as profane engenders a system of gendered inequality, objectification, and control, leading to gender-based violence and the denial of women's autonomy. This profanation is deeply intertwined with women's socioeconomic and political marginalization, restricting their mobility, educational and employment opportunities, and political representation (Mukherjee, 2016, p.19).

Therefore, the profanation of Indian women's bodies is not merely symbolic but has tangible impacts on their lives and well-being, representing a manifestation of the pervasive patriarchal and gender inequalities in Indian society. This necessitates active resistance and dismantlement for the realization of genuine equality and freedom for women. Shree's narrative also critiques the limitations placed on women's mobility and independence, exemplified by societal expectations around behaviour and dress to maintain purity and modesty. Shree sarcastically writes: Like when *Beti* was growing up and *Ma* had not yet grown old, and the household was constantly roiled with controversies over social codes, traditions, culture, protection, and *Ma* would grow short of breath as she tried to calm everyone else's breathing. (37) These expectations often restrict women's opportunities for employment outside the home, leading to a dependency on men and potentially to tragic consequences such as domestic violence and abuse.

## 6. Conclusion

It is evident that Durkheim's dialectic of the sacred and the profane is indispensable for dissecting the intricacies of gender and culture. The article illuminates how these constructs, far from being archaic vestiges of religious tradition, actively shape gender

perceptions and roles within society. Shree's "Tomb of Sand" is highlighted as a profound exploration of these themes, offering a critique of the Indian societal backdrop and prompting a reevaluation of entrenched cultural norms.

The novel's vivid engagement with these Durkheimian concepts provides a stark depiction of the oscillation of femininity between reverence and denigration. It reveals the cultural and societal mechanisms that craft and often confine women's identities within a patriarchal framework. Shree's narrative, along with the discussions presented here, point to the urgent need to reassess how ancient dichotomies continue to influence contemporary gender dynamics.

Moreover, the analysis delves into the critical examination of patriarchal structures, as Shree's work brings to light the relegation of women to profane spaces and the consequential material realities of such marginalization. This serves as a rallying cry for a reevaluation of the societal edifices that sustain gender inequality and highlights literature's power in driving societal reflection and potential transformation.

As scholarship and activism progress, it is paramount that these discussions catalyze real-world change. The sacred and profane, through the lens of Durkheim and as personified in Shree's work, are vital to understanding and reshaping the cultural and social dimensions of gender oppression. The path forward calls for a transmutation of scholarly dialogue into tangible reforms that deconstruct patriarchal hegemony and champion a society where gender parity is actualized. Collective action and innovative thought are the keys to cultivating a society that genuinely honors equality and respect across genders, envisioning an era where patriarchal sanctity is critically questioned and the narratives of gender oppression are irrevocably overturned.

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