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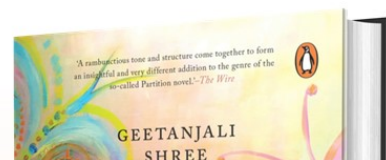


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Geetanjali Shree's Tomb of Sand – WINNER OF THE INTERNATIONAL BOOKER PRIZE 2022

📅 June 8, 2022 ⌚ 5 min read 👤 The Literature Times

What this Booker means for Indian literature?

Hindi writer Geetanjali Shree, whose novel *Ret Samadhi* translated into English as *Tomb of Sand* won the Booker recently deserves accolades on more than one count. Hers is indeed a well-known signature in the field of Hindi fiction, as she already has to her credit five collections of short stories and an equal number of novels. Also, it may be noted that the translation of her works is not happening for the first time. Her works have been translated into many other languages like French, German, Japanese and even Serbian and Korean.

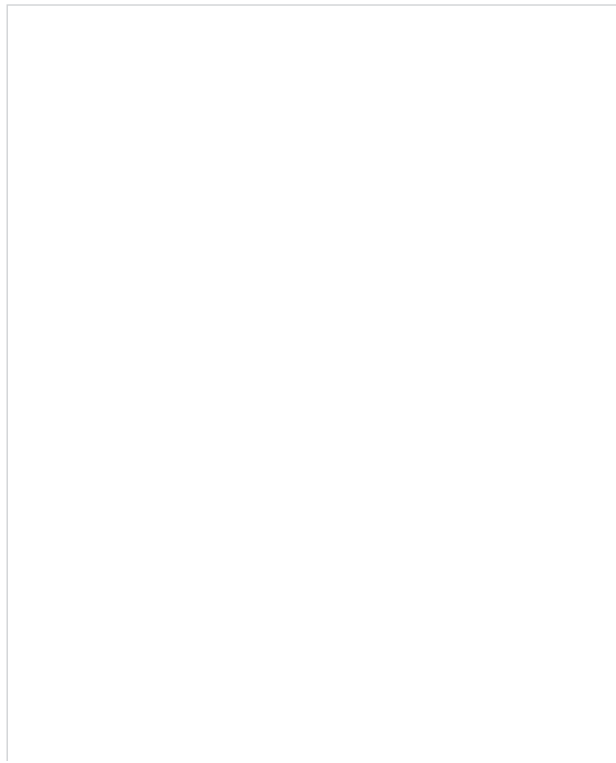
For one, Shree's present novel *Tomb of Sand* carries forward her faith in woman power even as she explores different relationships – mother-daughter, siblings, friends, etc. Her earlier novel *Mai* too broke the stereotypical image of women whom she presented as powerful female characters. In the present novel, we have an octogenarian woman protagonist riven between memory and desire. When her husband dies at a ripe old age, she looks forward to leading life with her daughter who has strong feminist views but soon there is the entry of a transgender and things change. The lady in question is fully rejuvenated and has the longing to lead life afresh. That at her age indeed shows her grit. The narrative has the Desi flavor – something expected of writing in an Indian language. She has also employed monologues, flashback, and even magic realism bringing to life several authors. The Hindi edition of the novel also shows the beauty of Shree's impressionistic narrative style and crisp prose. However, the English translation is also impressive.

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The story takes a turn with the memory of pre-Partition days haunting the old woman, and she crosses the border with Pakistan illegally to meet her lost love, but does not have the luck of *Bajrangji Bhaijaan* and is shot dead. The Partition of India in 1947 was a cataclysmic event that has been all time favourite with the Indian writers writing in English. Starting from Bhabani Bhattacharya's *So Many Hungers* and Khushwant Singh's *Train to Pakistan*, to Salman Rushdie's *Midnight's Children* and Amitav Ghosh's *The Shadow Lines*, the theme continues to inspire many writers. Renowned Hindi writer and Shree's guru by latter's own admission Krishna Sobti's *Zindginama* and Bhisham Sahni's *Tamas* are a few other titles that come to mind. In more recent times, the Partition of India has attracted many foreign authors also.

Secondly, the award of the Booker Prize to *Tomb of Sand* is a great boost to Hindi language, and in a way, to an Indian language since 1912 when Rabindranath Tagore won the Noble for his *Gitanjali* written in Bengali and translated by himself. Taking note of a work in what the erstwhile colonizers called "vernacular" language (meaning the language of the slaves) may or may not be condescending for them, but for many in India it would still be uplifting due to the colonial mindset. It is also welcome because it can provide opportunity to Bhasha literature to at least get noticed by foreign publishing houses which have so far been fed by mostly Indian writing done originally in English.

One may look at some factors which could be incidental or conditioning depending on individual predilection. While Tagore's *Gitanjali* had an introduction by W.B. Yeats, the great Irish poet, Shree's novel has been translated by Daisy Rockwell, a renowned American translator settled in England. In the process, we can overlook the fact that the Booker is considered for those works which have been published in UK or Ireland at the most. This is not to underrate Shree's work but to stress the point that there may be great books penned in Indian languages which cannot be considered by the Booker jury. For the present, we can celebrate the award as an enabler that puts our national language at par with the language of power that English is in India.



Thirdly, the award is expected to encourage translators and the publishers won't have to get a European interlocutor to recognize the Indian talent. There have been wonderful translations earlier too, like Sri Aurobindo's translation of Bankimchandra's *Anandmath*, U.R. Ananthamurthy's Kannada classic *Samskara* by A.K. Ramanujan, himself an accomplished poet. Similarly, Prem Chand's Hindi novel *Godan* translated by Jai Ratan and P. Lal, and Tagore's Bangla novel *Ghare Baire* by Tagore's nephew Surendranath Tagore. There is no doubt that Indian translators can play a big role in highlighting the Bhasha literature which is truly rooted in the soil unlike the diasporic literature that is faulted for its lack of authenticity, depend as it does on controlled media platforms for all type of information.

Even though translation is considered to be an imperfect art, what with the personal choices that the translator has to make with regard to language, the untranslatable stylistic aspect, the cultural difference at the receiving point, and above all, the political/ideological slant that unconsciously creeps in at the point of translation, yet a good, and to the extent possible, an objective and aesthetically appealing translation is the dire need in the contemporary world where despite the hiccups in the globalization process, the demands of multiculturalism are and will remain perpetually relevant and will be greatly helped through translations of great works. The *Tomb of Sand* is quite carefully translated and is sure to help the world understand the Indian situation and culture in a better and a bit more authentic manner.



Reviewed By: Dr. Jagdish Batra

Dr. Jagdish Batra is a professor of English at O.P. Jindal Global University. His book *Indian English Fiction (2001-2020): History and Reflections* was published last year. Apart from it, he has authored ten more books and 60+ research papers majorly on contemporary Indian English Fiction.

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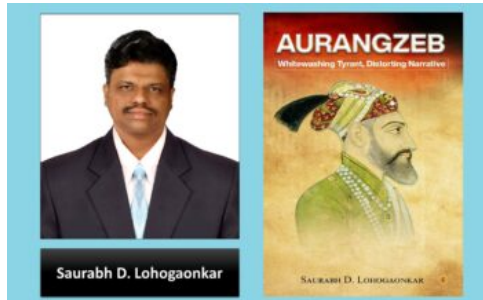
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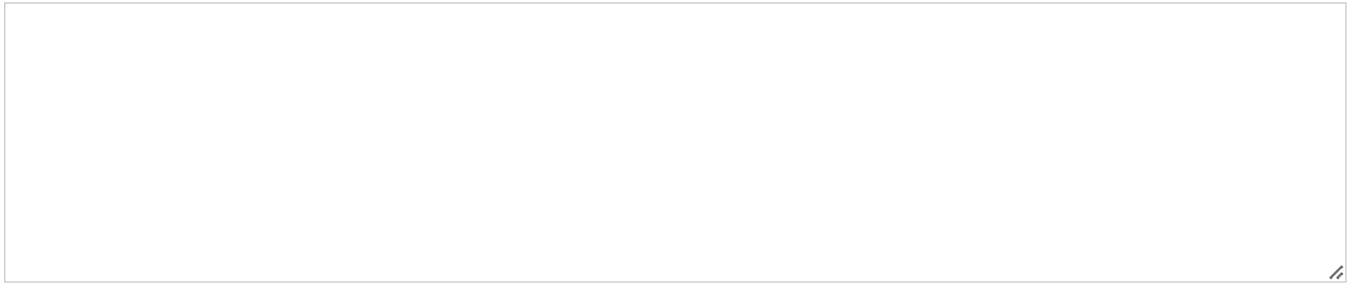
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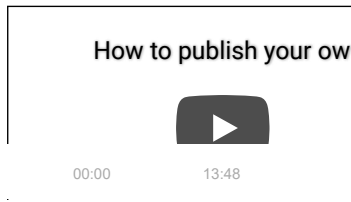
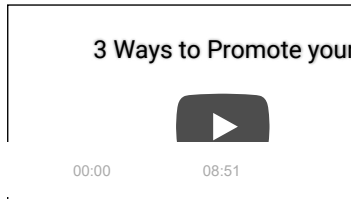
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