



Layers of Identity: Gender and Memory in Geetanjali Shree and Krishna Sobti's Narratives

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Abstract: This paper examines the identity narratives presented in Geetanjali Shree's novel, "The Roof Beneath Their Feet," and Krishna Sobti's "The Music of Solitude." It compares how the authors have portrayed the intricate nature of personal identity, gender, social dynamics, and spatial relationships. For Shree, it is the story of two women navigating the tension between societal expectations and individual liberty within the same physical space. The novel by Sobti becomes a material, introspective journey of a woman seeking solitude and self-discovery. The study, which contrasts the two works, aims to highlight the prevalent themes in both and the unique narrative styles employed by Shree and Sobti to convey various shades of identity formation and expression. This paper aims to provide a deeper understanding of how literature reflects upon and challenges social roles constructed around identity through close textual analysis, while also supplementing theoretical frameworks from studies on identity and narrative theory.

Keywords: Identity; Narratives; Gender; Social dynamics; Solitude; Self-discovery

Introduction

The narrative identity of an individual is the story of their life, in continuous evolution, as it connects reconstructions of the past with imaginings of the future to yield a life that makes sense and gives direction (McAdams and McLean). Narratives work with a series of events or experiences that are often registered as information and are presented in forms that range from fiction and nonfiction to abstraction (Aggarwal and Naik). The Literature offers identity narratives that explore and help understand cultural, social, and personal identities. Such stories transcend their tales about people to symbolize broader questions of existence and society, showing us how we see ourselves as part of the world. What all of this becomes, then, is the question of narrative identity, a definition in literature studies explaining how individuals construct and present their identities through storytelling. Narrative identity encompasses the interplay between personal, social, and collective identities (Brewer and Gardner; Brown et al.). Personal identity concerns the concept and experience of self, which is shaped by personal experiences and inner self-reflection. The expression is vital in shaping one's sense of self (Blair). On the other hand, social identity stems from the relationship between individuals and the social expectations of society. Collective identity refers to a shared sense of identity or a feeling of belonging to a community, large group, or cultural group. These dimensions are so deeply embedded in literary narratives that they consequently inform how characters and their experiences reflect broader societal and cultural contexts. Their study, therefore, opens up a way for a proper understanding of how literature reflects on and criticizes complex layers combining to form identity: a window into multifaceted human existence.



Thus, a writer who understands how to apply words correctly and has a vision rooted in the depths of humanity can bring to life credible characters that stir our emotions and reach our souls. There is nothing in the whole circle of literary work that has such a profound soliloquy as tragedy; there is nothing in the entire world of language that has as much of nature and the passion of guesswork as dialogue story; therefore, it is taken into consideration as accounting for countless things about human nature that cannot be expressed in any way. Regarding South Asian literature, Geetanjali Shree and Krishna Sobti have assumed the roles of countercultural rebels, delving more deeply into questions of identity and the human condition. The interpretive and contrasting adventures of “The Roof Beneath Their Feet” and “The Music of Solitude” are embedded with the cultural, social, and psychological perspectives about identity formation.

Memory and Identity

Memory is the axis of reception around which the characters' identities in both novels are located. In "The Roof Beneath Their Feet," Shree employs memory as a narrative strategy to reveal the complex layers of identity of her characters. The novel opens when the protagonist begins to reflect on bygone times, reminiscing about her childhood days in the mohalla and the enigmatic figure of Lalna. These memories are not merely reminiscences but function as vectors through which identities are constructed and deconstructed.

Shree writes, *"Walls have ears, but alas they can't speak – the people living under this roof lamented – or they would have told such stories about the secret goings-on of the mohalla!"* (Shree, p.4). The introduction sets a narrative tone at once, and memory becomes what really drives the impression of identity. If one views it, one might see, through the protagonist is wandering within her memories, a glimpse into how her identity was shaped by shared experiences and whispers within her community. Identity is a central idea in Shree's narrative of Lalna. She is introduced as a mystery character from the children's perspective at the mohalla. The mystery element, half-laden with social judgment in the introduction of Lalna, sets the base for her identity struggles:

"Lalna. That was not her name. What her name was, no one knew. All they knew was that she had come crying one day to Premanand-ji's house, and from then on, people knew her as Lallan's bahu" (Shree, p.4).

Indirect characterisation through the community's perception reveals more of the external forces that shape Lalna's identity. Her authentic self is hidden behind these imposed roles, a scenario painting the general view that identity is constructed but at the same time confined by society. Lalna's story continues to reveal how her identity has been shaped and reshaped in response to the community's expectations and perceptions. Lallan is the only one who reminds the narrator of the chachcho memory, which is clearly shown in the narrator's words:

"Why did she have to come back now, when everything reminds me of Chachcho? As if she were some relic of hers, shadowing her every memory." (Shree, p.5).



This line is apt in bringing across the complex emotions he feels when one returns at that moment in time when he is intensely inside his memories of Chachcho: *“Memory, from which particulars had slowly slipped away, leaving behind only a formless presence”* (Shree, p. 6). The bitterness might be regarding being resentful or uncomfortable about lalna returning or bringing back more intense memories of Chachcho, whom he could have been grieving or sorting feelings for. However, slowly it is seen that the narrator starts getting soft towards lalna and uses tender words towards her and when seeing her cleaning the Chachcho cupboard making him to realise and making him to questioning to himself that she *“Serving Chachcho’s memory? Or her own future?”* (Shree, p.6). This means the narrator wants to express his concern for Lalana, but more so for him. It is the memories only that come too suddenly and in chaotic permutations, opposing their wish for something more gradual and profound in their sorrow. In Sobti's "The Music of Solitude," the central protagonist, Aranya, becomes an isolated character whose identity is inseparably tied to her memories. Through the lonely existence of Aranya, Sobti develops a canvas that considers introspection and reflection on past experiences, leading to the formation of identity. In this sense, through the memories of her relationships and past experiences, Aranya comes to know herself and comprehends her position in the world. Sobti describes Aranya often found herself lost in the corridors of her mind, where memories of past loves and losses played like an endless symphony, each note adding a layer to her identity. It is described in the opening part when Aanaya takes to herself:

“Look carefully, Aranya. Isn’t that wrinkled face yours?”

It is indeed. So what? We grow older by the moment, don’t we?

Yes. But you must know that these are not lines of torment. They’ve grown and ripened with time. The time we ourselves lived through.” (Sobti, p.4).

This line underscores the pivotal role of memory in shaping identity. Aranya is an identity mosaic that she has undergone through her past experiences, and through being alone, she becomes deeply involved with her memory, thereby continuously evolving her sense of self. The Aranya attempts to convey that misfortune is indifferent to emotions like love, and hence, hardships strike all. It means that though we may keep the memories alive, once the person is gone, they lack life and any significance:

“Misfortune feels no pity. Not even in the face of love. And even though these memories have been preserved, they are dead. After the body is gone, if at all anything remains, it’s memory. Nothing else. Step outside the dexterity of life and you’re gone” (Sobti, p.15).

Thus, Memory becomes a narrative strategy employed by both authors to delve deeply into the complexities of the identity-formation process, highlighting how personal and collective memories have shaped the identities of the characters.



Social Structures and Identity

The substantial impact of community and society on individual identity thus arises as a common factor across both novels. In "The Roof Beneath Their Feet," Shree proffered the mohalla as a character unto itself. Such a dynamic social setting, with its social dynamics among its residents, creates an inherently rich environment in which identity is negotiated through shared histories and collective experiences. Indeed, the reflections by the protagonist show how individuals are often goaded into action by societal expectations and a need for acceptance or belonging. She witnesses how they struggle with societal labels and the roles they play as she observes their lives. Shree elaborates on how the norms and expectations of society shape the identities of individuals living in the mohalla. In the novel, Lallan is described as:

"All they were interested in was Lalna – the magnet to which all their curiosity had attached itself. Lallan's bahu, whom Uncle called 'Lallan ki' and Chachcho called 'Lalna'. (Shree, p.4).

Whereas Shree describes Chachcho:

"As she grew older, Chachcho covered up more and more of her body. A blouse cut like a kurti to cover her midriff. Long, loose sleeves, coming down to her fingers. The pallu covering her head, down to her forehead. Her face wrapped tight in her aanchal. Her feet covered in shoes or lost under her sari. Uncle's death has broken her, the people airing themselves on the roof said. That's how devoted our women are." (Shree, p.8-9).

This societal lens through which both are viewed confines their identity to a box with certain expectations and roles, thereby restricting their ability to express themselves.

In "The Music of Solitude," Sobti reveals the influence of yet another social structure on identity. The amount of interaction Aranya has with other individuals is kept to a minimum because she has become reclusive and does not engage with the conventional aspects of society. As a result, her identity is seen more as a function of internal reflection than as being regulated by conventional societal norms; however, this is still set against the backdrop of the social structure, highlighting feelings of isolation.

"The cobbled footpath has begun to look new. No old memories, no reproaches, no rivalry, no aggression, no civilities. Just walking together, the two of us. It's good to walk. That's what the doctor says as well" (Sobti, p.10).

The moment seems to convey tranquillity and simplicity when the protagonist, Aranya, is engaged in a peaceful, meditative action: walking with Ishan, free from the burdens of past grievances or societal pressures. It is an image of a "new" cobbled footpath, with an emphasis on walking as a therapeutic action that reflects a state of introspection and disengagement from conventional demands made by society.



Personal Identity and Self-Reflection

Shree embodies the traditional roles assigned to women within the community, navigating the expectations of motherhood, loyalty, and domesticity. Chachcho's identity, steeped in duty and sacrifice, reflects the rigid gender norms prevalent in the mohalla, demonstrating the societal forces that both define and confine female identities.

“Chachcho, who was not my mother, my anguish over that fact hurting me more and more since my childhood. Whom I consider in every way, in every condition, my mother” (Shree, p. 19).

This emotional acknowledgement creates a complex relationship between the protagonist and Chachcho, who serves as a surrogate mother and embodies societal expectations. The protagonist grapples with her feelings of longing and loss while also recognising the restrictive nature of Chachcho's identity as defined by societal norms. Shree uses Chachcho's character to explore the intersection of personal and social identities, illustrating how the weight of tradition often hampers individual aspirations. On the other hand, in "The Music of Solitude," Sobti explores the theme of isolation to illustrate how societal expectations and structures can both shape and sometimes suppress individual identity. Aranya's loneliness serves as a metaphor for her struggle against the societal norms and the expectations placed upon her by those around her.

Sobti writes:

“I'm taking the air in. Pulling in the oxygen, all the way to my soul, glad that I'm alive; my companions, they all left, a long time ago”(Sobti, p.4).

By seeing in solitude the strength of feeling her existence with the feeling of her own identity, Aranya was able to let the feeling overcome her. She decides to let go of the memories of those who have changed or lost their former selves. At last, she finds peace and contentment in simply being alive with her own solitude. Like Aranya, only Ishan, the other character, is depicted as living in loneliness. Sobti presents their solitude in a way that allows them to connect. This is shown when Ishan visits Aranya but cannot find the words in response to which:

“Aranya said: We can hear the silence because we live alone” (Sobti, p.50).

According to Aranya, when we are alone, we can see the silence more clearly. Isolation, hence, therefore helps concentrate on the quiet and allows time for reflections of thoughts and feelings undisturbed. Ultimately, both Shree and Sobti illustrate how social structures serve as both a source of constraint and a canvas for the characters' identities. While Shree emphasises the impact of these structures on individual identity through the lens of societal roles, Sobti highlights the role of personal agency in navigating and resisting these constraints.

Gender and Identity

Both novels also detailed the theme of gender and its effect on identity. The description of Lalna and Chachcho in Shree's novel portrays the gendered dimensions of identity in a patriarchal society. The societal expectations about the roles women are supposed to play are reflected throughout "The Roof



Beneath Their Feet." For example, how Lalna is referred to as "Lallan's bahu" and not by her name reflects how she is subsumed under her relationship with a man. Similarly, the transformation of Chachcho after the demise of her husband emphasises how a woman derives her identity from her married status and societal perceptions about widowhood.

In "The Music of Solitude," Sobti raises questions about gender and identity through the character of Aranya. Having a walk with Ishan in City Park, she said to Ishan.

"Did you see the dusky rose-daughter in the red-orange flower patch?" (Sobti, p.9). The name "rose-daughter" sounds beautiful. Ishan poses the question of whether the name signals a prospective feminist influence. Aranya thinks it does so because, in this park, there are considerably more boys or sons than there are girls or daughters. They keep saying this because it is the situation that is painted, stating the girls (or daughters) are being overlooked, hence the concern about the minority. One can say with clarity that the most explicit critique is directed at the restrictive norms imposed upon women through the futile struggle for self-definition in light of societal expectations of womanhood and the ultimate retreat into the solitude of Aranya. This can be known when Aranya tells Ishan about their conversion:

"There are several editions of me. They can't be seen all the time. But when they surface, they take aim at me with lost weapons". (Sobti, p.39)

This proves that within Aranya, various versions or interpretations exist that are not always visible. However, once they are, they attack or criticise Aranya using outdated or ineffective methods of operation.

Narrative Techniques

The explorations of identity are further supported by the narrative techniques employed by both Shree and Sobti. In "The Roof Beneath Their Feet," Shree fragments the memories and employs a nonlinear narrative that embodies the complex sequences of identity formation. The scrambled memories and constantly shifting perspectives reflect the inner turmoil of the protagonist as she tries to piece together her sense of self amidst the constraints of society.

While "The Music of Solitude" by Sobti is rather more introspective and contemplative, the narrative style allies with internal monologue and stream-of-consciousness techniques to take the reader deep inside the mind and emotions of Aranya, into a window of self-identity in evolution. In this rich and immersive experience, Sobti employs lyrical prose with a reflective tone that underscores the central theme of solitude and introspection.

Discussion

The identity narratives in Geetanjali Shree's *The Roof Beneath Their Feet* and Krishna Sobti's *The Music of Solitude* are very clearly illustrative of both writers, who have intricately represented the details and issues associated with personal and collective identity. Shree, while presenting the interwoven lives of the women in the mohalla, displays the struggle between societal expectations and personal wants. The narrative device of memory emphasises how identities are formed and



reformulated over time through societal and individual perceptions. Lalna's blurred identity and Chachcho's well-marked, rigid framework of traditional gender roles bring forth the social parameters within which women's identities have invariably been located and defined in a patriarchal society.

In contrast, Sobti's realisation of a lonely life brings forth deep introspection into the individual's very search for self-realisation. The journey of memory and loneliness undertaken by Aranya is, in fact, resistance to the social order, centring the personal and internal construction of identity. Then, the text dwells on those fine points of gender and solitude, which seek to manifest the character of Aranya, deeply introverted and secluded from the conventional wiles of typical societal roles.

The way these themes work out in the two novels is quite distinct. Shree's fragmented and non-linear narrative parallels the chaotic process of identity formation, while Sobti's introverted and contemplative style opens a window into the inner world of the protagonist. Not only do these techniques enrich the narrative, but they also highlight the intricate relationships between individual identity and the structures of society.

Conclusion

Compared to Geetanjali Shree's *The Roof Beneath Their Feet*, the research into the identity narratives presented in Krishna Sobti's *The Music of Solitude* is more detailed and nuanced. Both authors challenge traditional gender norms and societal expectations with their innovative narrative styles, which most eloquently portray women negotiating their identities in complex social contexts. While Shree focuses on the fabric of memory and the past, as well as communal life, Sobti addresses the loneliness of the individual and his introversion; yet, both underline the constant bartering that goes on between one's desires and societal pressure. This study substantiates the potential role that literature can play in reflecting and critiquing social roles and the constructs of identity, and therefore offers rich insights into the complex nature of human existence. The novels greatly aid in making identity formation and expression authentic to us within contemporary literary discourse because they explore themes such as gender, solitude, and social dynamics.

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