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**The Poetics of Silence: Trauma, Dhvani, and the Feminine Psyche in Selected Novels of Geetanjali Shree and Arupa Patangia Kalita**

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**Abstract**

This article explores how three contemporary Indian women's novels translated into English, namely, Geetanjali Shree's *Tomb of Sand* and *The Roof Beneath Their Feet*, and Arupa Patangia Kalita's *The Loneliness of Hira Barua*, revisit Indian aesthetics by foregrounding the concept of **dhvani** or aesthetic suggestion. Through trauma, silence, and the feminine psyche, these works articulate suffering not by explicit narration but by leveraging Indian modes of resonance, metaphor, and emotional undertone—the core aspects of classical Indian literary theory. In contrast to Western trauma models that prioritize confession and verbal articulation, these Indian English novels represent pain and resilience through atmospheric suggestion, spatial metaphors (walls, roofs, borders), and the layering of unspoken meaning, cultivating a distinctly Indian aesthetic of silence and endurance. Thus, this paper contends that Indian literature in English, when analyzed through the lens of dhvani, not only recovers but innovatively adapts indigenous aesthetic principles to contemporary contexts of trauma, gender, and cultural memory, offering a critical framework for reimagining Indian aesthetics in the global literary sphere.

**Keywords:** dhvani, trauma, silence, Indian aesthetics, feminine psyche, Indian literature in English

**Introduction**

Trauma in Indian literature is usually expressed through silence, metaphor, and emotional suggestion rather than through direct narration. These modes of expression are deeply connected to India's classical aesthetic traditions. Western trauma theory, shaped by thinkers such as Sigmund Freud and Cathy Caruth, emphasize the importance of verbalizing traumatic experience in order to process it. Freud's psychoanalytic model understands trauma as the return of the repressed, an experience that remains unassimilated in the mind and therefore seeks expression through repetition and speech. Contrary to this, many Indian

literary traditions make way for trauma to emerge indirectly, through symbols, pauses, and emotional resonance rather than through explicit articulation.

This aesthetic approach can be more clearly understood through the concept of *dhvani*, a key principle of classical Indian poetics developed by the ninth-century Kashmiri philosopher and literary theorist **Ānandavardhana** in his seminal work *Dhvanyāloka*. Ānandavardhana argues that the deepest meaning of poetry does not lie in what is directly stated but in what is suggested. According to him, language works on three levels: the literal meaning (*abhidhā*), the indicated meaning (*lakṣaṇā*), and the suggested meaning (*vyāñjanā*). Among these, suggestion or *dhvani*, is the most powerful because it evokes subtle emotional and aesthetic responses in the reader that cannot be fully conveyed through direct description. According to this theory, silence, imagery, and symbolic gestures become the narrative tools that allow literature to communicate experiences that are otherwise difficult to articulate in words.

The idea of *dhvani* is closely connected to the classical aesthetic concept of *rasa*, particularly *karuṇa rasa*, the aesthetic experience of sorrow and compassion. In Indian poetics, as explained by Sheldon Pollock, emotions are not merely described but suggested through language, imagery, and atmosphere. As emotional depth is often conveyed through suggestion or *dhvani*, Bharata Muni's chapter 6, *Natyashastra*, a first-millennium BCE Sanskrit Literature on the arts is devoted to the *rasa* concept. According to the theory of *rasa*, such emotions are aesthetically experienced through a process of universalization that allows readers to share feelings like sorrow beyond personal context. This approach becomes especially significant in narratives of trauma, where suffering may resist direct expression.

Such a framework is particularly useful for understanding contemporary Indian women's writing that explores themes of Partition trauma, domestic oppression, loneliness, and emotional abandonment. Within many social contexts, women's pain has historically been silenced or mediated through culturally accepted forms of expression. Scholars such as Girindrasekhar Bose and Sudhir Kakar have noted that the Indian psyche often negotiates conflict through relational and symbolic forms rather than through direct confrontation. This dynamic becomes particularly visible in narratives shaped by the memory of Partition, where women's experiences of displacement, loss, and violence are often preserved through fragmented memories, silences, and symbolic spaces rather than through direct historical narration.

While the works of Geetanjali Shree and Arupa Patangia Kalita have been discussed in relation to themes such as Partition, identity, and gender, not much attention has been given to the aesthetic techniques through which trauma is expressed in their narratives. In particular, the role of *dhvani*, suggestion, silence, and emotional resonance, has not been sufficiently explored as a framework for understanding the representation of trauma in these texts. By bringing together classical Indian aesthetics and trauma theory, this paper examines

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how silence and symbolic imagery convey the psychological depth of the feminine experience.

The study of three contemporary Indian novels namely, Geetanjali Shree's *Tomb of Sand* (2021), *The Roof Beneath Their Feet* (2008), and Arupa Patangia Kalita's *The Loneliness of Hira Barua* (2017) has been undertaken to explore how trauma is conveyed through the aesthetics of suggestion. Through close readings of recurring metaphors such as walls, borders, rooftops, domestic interiors, shadows, and rain, the study argues that these texts generate meaning through resonance rather than direct explanation. Henceforth, *dhvani* becomes a powerful interpretive framework, allowing readers to perceive the unspoken emotional worlds of the female characters. The subtle interplay of silence, memory, and symbolic imagery in these novels help in portraying the psychological depth of trauma while remaining rooted in the cultural aesthetics of Indian literary tradition.

#### **Literature Review**

Scholars studying trauma in Indian literature often highlight the role of silence, symbolism, and emotional suggestion rather than direct narration. Ānandavardhana's concept of *dhvani* explains how deeper meanings emerge through implication, while Sheldon Pollock emphasizes the importance of *rasa* in shaping emotional experience in literature. Psychoanalytic thinkers such as Girindrasekhar Bose and Sudhir Kakar further note that emotional conflict in Indian contexts is often negotiated through relationships and symbolic expression.

#### **Methodology**

This study employs close textual analysis of selected novels by Geetanjali Shree and Arupa Patangia Kalita. It focuses on recurring metaphors such as borders, rooftops, and domestic spaces to explore how silence and suggestion function within the narratives. By drawing on both Indian aesthetic theory and psychoanalytic perspectives, the study interprets how trauma is indirectly expressed in women's literary experiences.

#### **Close Reading of texts with Dhvani as a literary tool of language.**

The close reading of these three works demonstrate how modern Indian fiction adapts classical aesthetics to contemporary contexts. In these texts, women do not always express their trauma through direct speech or dramatic confession. Instead, their pain often unfolds quietly, through silence, through the spaces they inhabit, and through their relationship with nature. Their rooms, homes, borders, and landscapes begin to carry emotional weight. Silence becomes more than the absence of words; it becomes a meaningful mode of expression. The house may feel heavy with memory, the desert may hold buried histories, and an empty courtyard may echo with loss. In this way, trauma is not loudly declared but gently embedded in surroundings. Emotional memory becomes attached to place, and space itself turns into a silent witness. Such representation suggests that women negotiate suffering not only through speech but through endurance, containment, and symbolic expression. Silence, therefore, emerges not as weakness but as a subtle, resilient language of survival. This approach, grounded in Indian aesthetic theory, challenges Western

trauma paradigms and emphasizes the importance of culturally rooted interpretation in understanding women's pain and endurance.

In *Tomb of Sand*, Geetanjali Shree reimagines the Partition novel through language and philosophy, centering on Maa, an 80-year-old woman whose playful, layered voice shapes a journey into her past that is both literal and symbolic. The novel's central metaphor, the **border** is rendered not as a historical line but as a vibrational symbol carrying the weight of silenced trauma. Maa declares, "*Do not accept the border. Do not break yourself into bits with the border. There's only us.*" (Shree, 464) Her lines seem whimsical on the surface, yet they contain the dhvani of Partition trauma, exile, lost love, and fractured identity.

Ānandavardhana argues that true poetic meaning lies in "that which is not directly stated but is made known through suggestion" (Gerow et al., 1993). Maa's refusal to accept the border operates as precisely such a suggestion: the implicit story of her girlhood rupture in 1947 vibrates beneath her seemingly eccentric declarations. When she theatrically performs the **navarasa**, "*She enacted all nine rasas*" (Shree, 464), while dancing on an imagined borderline, she transforms trauma into aesthetic expression. The performance becomes a resonant echo of her interior pain, never spoken but deeply felt. The "line" she draws is simultaneously the political border of India-Pakistan and the psychological border between her past and present selves.

The emotional force here is not in the narrative surface but in the **dhvani**, the undertones of longing, grief, and memory that readers sense intuitively. In this sense, *Tomb of Sand* enacts what Sheldon Pollock describes as "aestheticized emotion", where rasa emerges not through event but through suggestive atmosphere. (Pollock, 2016)

One of the novel's most haunting images is Maa merging with the wall. Shree writes, "*The wall is cold to the touch... Let this be my tomb.*" (Shree, 46) The wall symbolizes entombment, withdrawal, and dissociation. Maa imagines herself becoming a tiny creature slipping into the cracks of the wall, evoking the rasa of **karuṇā** (pathos) and **śānta** (tranquil resignation). According to classical theory, such imagery conveys meaning through symbolic suggestion. The wall becomes a dhvani symbol of her internal turmoil, depicting her desire to run away from worldly routines.

The metaphor also connects with Indian psychoanalytic perspectives. Bose suggests that Indian individuals often deal with psychic conflict by harmonizing it, where trauma is absorbed into symbolic or spiritual frameworks rather than openly confronted. Ma mirrors this process, instead of speaking about her trauma, she channels it into a metaphorical merging with the wall. Throughout the novel, Shree employs recurring metaphors of walls, doors, and borders to represent bondage, freedom, and, at times, to bridge the past and the present. The *dhvani* generated through these metaphors evokes the emotional resonance of trauma more powerfully than literal description.

Shree's language itself foregrounds dhvani. In the translator's note, Daisy Rockwell states that Shree's Hindi "relishes the sound of words, their echoes and vibrations... showcasing their dhvani. Geetanjali often makes word choices that prioritize dhvani over dictionary meaning" (Rockwell, 517). Ma's inner world emerges through wordplay, phonetic echoes, and multilingual resonances that suggest meaning rather than state it directly. In this way, *Tomb of Sand* represents trauma not through direct narration but through sound, symbolism, and atmosphere, allowing it to be felt rather than explicitly told.

In *The Roof Beneath Their Feet*, Shree turns from Partition to the intimate architecture of a mohalla, using the roof as a liminal feminine space where secrets, desires, and emotional bonds circulate. The opening lines establish the rooftop's resonant quality, "*Stories were created, stories were told... They echoed in the wind that swept the rooftops*" (Shree, 4) The roof becomes a **theatrical stage**, a **sound chamber**, a **memory archive**, carrying whispers, rumours, and laughter. This echoing is not merely acoustic but **aesthetic**, aligning with dhvani's emphasis on resonance.

Lalna and Chachcho's relationship unfolds almost entirely on the rooftop. Their bond is ambiguous, intimate, and maybe queer, all of which is evoked through **gestures, shadows, movement, and atmosphere**, not direct narrative exposition. "*They take off their slippers, walk barefoot, They hold hands and walk to the edge of the mohalla.*" Shree further writes, *This is their world. They hold each other tight so that they don't fall down from an overdose of happiness in this free kingdom of theirs. The roof laughs and moves beneath their feet, scaring them a little.*" (Shree, 30) In this scene, the roof becomes a symbolic space where Chachcho and Lalna experience a sense of freedom that is absent in their everyday lives. Walking barefoot and holding hands suggests a deep bond of companionship and trust between them. The description of the roof "laughing" and moving beneath their feet creates a playful and joyful atmosphere, hinting at a world that belongs only to them. Through this imagery, Shree does not directly explain their relationship; instead, the *dhvani* of the scene suggests emotional intimacy, female solidarity, and a temporary escape from the social restrictions of the mohalla. In this way, the roof becomes more than just a physical setting; it emerges as a symbolic space where emotional intimacy, freedom, and female solidarity can briefly exist beyond the restrictive boundaries of the social world.

The rooftop is also where the community witnesses Lalna's beating. Shree describes the scene through silence: "*In the darkness, nothing was seen but everything was heard.*" (Shree, 29) The exploitation of women and violence is filtered through sound, shouts, impacts, gasps, but the community's response is mute. This deliberate aesthetic choice transforms silence into complicity. The crowd's refusal to intervene becomes the true violence of the scene. Dhvani operates here as **moral indictment**, suggesting through silence what the narrative does not explicitly condemn.

Sudhir Kakar's insights into Indian familial and communal structures shed light on this aspect. He argues that Indian women's suffering is often embedded in webs of relational duty and collective silence (Kakar, 2012). Chachcho's trauma in witnessing Lalna's humiliation, and her own internalized pain, fits precisely into this psycho-cultural pattern.

The rooftop's geography becomes a metaphor for the women's emotional landscapes, expansive, elevated, free yet precariously exposed. Their joy produces **śṛṅgāra rasa** (love/playfulness) interlaced with **bībhatsa rasa** (disgust) evoked by the mohalla's gaze. Dhvani allows these conflicting rasas to coexist, producing a layered emotional texture.

Thus, the novel dramatizes how women inhabit spaces shaped by surveillance, desire, longing, and danger, spaces where silence is both survival strategy and expressive mode.

Arupa Patangia Kalita's *The Loneliness of Hira Barua* shifts the focus from rooftops and borders to the constricted interior of a middle-class Assamese home. Yet, dhvani remains central. The novel expresses Hira's emotional isolation through domestic objects, fading light, and environmental sounds. In one scene, Hira sits alone as dusk falls: "*The room darkened slowly as if the walls themselves were withdrawing.*" The description creates **emotional resonance without psychological commentary**. The withdrawing walls suggest Hira's shrinking emotional world.

Rain, persistent and rhythmic, functions as another dhvani-symbol. "*The rain beat upon the tin roof as though speaking a language Hira could not voice.*" (Kalita, 84) The rain becomes Hira's unexpressed grief, which is both soothing and suffocating. Hira's marriage is marked by unfinished sentences, emotional distance, and a pervasive quietude. Kalita writes, "*An abandoned kitten from somewhere, a stray dog, a dove's chick falling from a broken nest...all these creatures crowded the home.*" (Kalita, 116) The presence of many deserted animals in Hira's home resemble her own situation lonely, unguarded and powerless. Thus the house becomes animate, witnessing her loneliness. The domestic space does not merely reflect her psyche, it absorbs and echoes it. This textual strategy aligns with Ānandavardhana's notion that suggestion may operate through **environmental metaphor**, where surroundings reflect unspoken interior states.

According to Sudhir Kakar, the Indian wife's role is intertwined with duty, emotional labour, and silent endurance. Hira embodies this paradigm. Bose's observation that Indian psyches tend toward internal harmonization is evident in Hira's inability to confront the death of her husband, instead, she quietly internalizes alienation. Dhvani becomes the only space where her trauma finds expression, through shadows, stillness, and soundscapes rather than dialogue.

Kalita's Assamese context enriches dhvani through local imagery, rivers, monsoon rhythms, and bamboo groves where nature becomes the medium for emotional suggestion. Hira's loneliness is never narrated, it is **evoked**. This makes *The Loneliness of Hira Barua* a powerful example of how dhvani functions beyond linguistic or regional boundaries, shaping contemporary feminist trauma narratives across India.

### **Comparative Analysis: Dhvani as Feminist Trauma Aesthetic**

Although the three novels differ in plot, location, and narrative style, each employs dhvani to express trauma in ways that are profoundly rooted in Indian cultural perspectives. Through this lens, trauma is not conveyed through direct catharsis, but rather through subtle and symbolic acts, a distinctly feminine expressive mode. For example, Ma's merging with the wall, Lalna and Chachcho's search for comfort in the rooftop shadows, and Hira's attentive listening to the rain as a reflection of her unsaid grief, all embody what can be called a feminine semiotics of silence. These gestures do not require explicit verbalization to communicate suffering; instead, they create a nuanced language of emotional experience.

### **Conclusion**

The contemporary Indian trauma novel cannot be fully appreciated without integrating **Indian aesthetic theory**, particularly dhvani, which offers an interpretive lens attuned to resonance, silence, and symbolic depth. *Tomb of Sand*, *The Roof Beneath Their Feet*, and *The Loneliness of Hira Barua* show how trauma is articulated in culturally specific ways that resist Western narrative paradigms. These novels foreground the feminine psyche as a site of unspoken suffering, suggestive metaphor, and spiritual endurance. Emotional experiences are subjective, embodied, and often ritualized.

I want my writing to be an experience of the visual, the auidial, the story content, the props on stage, the gaps as much as the fills making the pattern, an entire *mise-en-scene* making a text. I have internalized this influence, and it makes me see, hear, feel the text as much as read it and understand its content in the abstract. See a colour, hear a rhythm, and not just tell in words it's there. (*The Roof Beneath Their Feet*, Shree, 126)

In an interview with Rahul Soni, Geetanjali Shree explains that she wants her writing to be experienced not only through words but also through sound, rhythm, colour, and even silence. She describes the text as a kind of *mise-en-scène*, where meaning emerges from pauses, gaps, and sensory impressions as much as from the narrative itself. This approach reflects the aesthetic principle of *dhvani*, where meaning is suggested rather than directly stated. By allowing emotions and experiences to resonate through rhythm, imagery, and silence, Shree creates a narrative space in which trauma, especially the inner lives of women, can be felt indirectly rather than openly articulated. This approach reflects the aesthetic principle of *dhvani*, and When combined with insights from Indian psychoanalysts Bose and Kakar, dhvani reveals the uniquely Indian architecture of trauma, rooted in relationality, silence, and symbolic expressiveness. The works of Shree and Kalita illustrate how trauma

in Indian women's lives is not only culturally encoded and aestheticized, but also deeply interwoven with social expectations of quiet endurance.

Thus, the study of Indian trauma literature is incomplete without acknowledging the crucial role of Indian aesthetics. Dhvani is not merely a poetic device—it is a cultural psychology, a worldview, a mode of survival, and, most importantly, a profoundly Indian way of expressing and understanding pain.

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