

## Transgressing Borders and Boundaries: Memory, Nation, and Gender in Geetanjali Shree's *Tomb of Sand*

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### Abstract

This paper examines the thematic and narrative complexities of *Tomb of Sand* by Geetanjali Shree, focusing on how the novel interrogates political, geographical, generational, and gendered boundaries. Set against the haunting legacy of the Partition of India, the text explores how borders—both literal and metaphorical—shape identity, memory, and belonging. Through the journey of an eighty-year-old woman who crosses into Pakistan late in life, Shree reimagines the notion of borders not as rigid demarcations but as permeable, fluid, and deeply human constructs. This paper argues that *Tomb of Sand* destabilizes binaries such as nation/self, male/female, life/death, and past/present through experimental narrative techniques and linguistic play. By foregrounding marginalized voices and repressed histories, the novel ultimately presents transgression as an act of healing, resistance, and rediscovery.

**Keywords:** Partition, borders, memory, gender, trauma, transgression

### Introduction

*Tomb of Sand*, originally written in Hindi as *Ret Samadhi*, stands as a landmark in contemporary Indian literature. The novel gained international recognition when its English translation by Daisy Rockwell won the International Booker Prize in 2022, marking the first time a Hindi novel received the prestigious award. The narrative revolves around an eighty-year-old widow, often referred to simply as “Ma,” whose withdrawal after her husband’s death transforms into an unexpected journey across the India–Pakistan border.

At its surface, the novel recounts an elderly woman’s travel to Pakistan. Yet beneath this deceptively simple premise lies a complex meditation on Partition, memory, gender, aging, and nationhood. The text persistently transgresses boundaries—of genre, language, identity, and history—thereby questioning the very legitimacy of the lines that divide human experience.

### Reimagining the Political Border

The most visible boundary in the novel is the geopolitical border between India and Pakistan, drawn violently during the Partition of 1947. For Ma, this border is not merely a territorial line but a wound etched into memory. Her late-life desire to cross into Pakistan unsettles her family, who perceive the border as fixed and inviolable. Shree challenges the rigidity of nationalist narratives by presenting the border as porous and unstable. Through Ma’s journey, the text suggests that political lines cannot erase shared histories, languages, and affections. The crossing becomes an act of reclaiming a fragmented past and confronting unresolved trauma. The border, thus, shifts from being a symbol of division to a site of remembrance and reconciliation.

### **Gendered Boundaries and the Female Body**

Beyond national frontiers, *Tomb of Sand* interrogates patriarchal structures that confine women within domestic and social spaces. After her husband's death, Ma initially retreats into silence and invisibility, embodying the stereotypical image of the grieving widow. However, her subsequent transformation disrupts expectations associated with age, gender, and propriety.

Her decision to travel, to revisit a former love across the border, and to articulate suppressed memories represents a profound act of defiance. The female body, often regulated by social codes, becomes a vehicle of resistance. Ma's rebirth destabilizes the binary of youth and old age, suggesting that desire, agency, and selfhood are not bound by chronological limits.

The novel also subverts heteronormative assumptions and rigid gender identities through its playful narrative tone. By foregrounding unconventional relationships and fluid identities, Shree broadens the scope of what constitutes belonging and love. The opening line—"The old woman was lying down. She had turned her back to the world"—signals more than physical withdrawal (Shree 3). It stages an act of narrative suspension. The protagonist, referred to as "Ma," initially refuses participation in social life, collapsing into silence after her husband's death. But this silence is not emptiness; it is gestational.

Shree's narrative style refuses linear chronology. Past and present interweave; the narrator intrudes; sentences expand and coil. Such formal experimentation mirrors what Homi K. Bhabha describes as the "liminal" or "in-between" space of postcolonial identity, where meaning is negotiated rather than fixed (Bhabha 2). The novel occupies this third space linguistically and structurally. It resists singular interpretation and instead embraces multiplicity.

Language itself becomes unstable terrain. The playful repetition of words, sudden tonal shifts, and metafictional commentary prevent narrative closure. In doing so, Shree enacts what feminist narratology identifies as resistance to phallogocentric linearity—a rejection of hierarchical, goal-oriented storytelling. The narrative meanders like memory, refusing patriarchal demands for coherence and control.

Translation further complicates the text's fluidity. Daisy Rockwell's English version carries over much of the Hindi's rhythm and wordplay. Translation becomes a metaphorical border crossing, reinforcing Bhabha's notion that cultural meaning emerges through hybridity rather than purity (Bhabha 37).

### **Gender Performativity and the Aging Female Body**

Ma's transformation is central to the novel's feminist force. Initially confined within the role of widow, she embodies what society expects: silence, passivity, withdrawal. But her subsequent reanimation destabilizes these expectations. Her late-life desire—to travel, to remember, to reconnect with a past love—challenges the assumption that agency belongs exclusively to youth.

Judith Butler's theory of gender performativity is useful here. Butler argues that gender is not an innate essence but a repeated performance sustained through social norms (Butler 191).

Widowhood, too, functions as a performance—regulated through dress, behavior, and silence. Ma disrupts this script. Her refusal to remain “properly” aged or properly widowed exposes the constructed nature of these identities.

The novel foregrounds the aging female body not as decline but as possibility. In reclaiming her past love across the border, Ma asserts erotic memory and emotional autonomy. This gesture unsettles heteronormative and generational hierarchies. Feminist criticism has long examined how older women are rendered invisible in literature; Shree counters this erasure by positioning an elderly woman at the center of narrative momentum.

Ma’s transformation illustrates Butler’s insight that subversive performances can expose the instability of dominant norms (Butler 199). By acting outside prescribed roles, she reveals the fragility of patriarchal structures that depend upon repetition and compliance.

### **Partition, Trauma, and Gendered Memory**

Although *Tomb of Sand* unfolds decades after 1947, Partition remains its spectral presence. The India–Pakistan border is not simply geopolitical; it is psychological. For Ma, crossing into Pakistan means confronting a buried history of love and loss.

Urvashi Butalia’s groundbreaking work on Partition emphasizes how women’s stories were silenced within nationalist narratives (Butalia 4). Official histories prioritized political leaders and territorial negotiations, while gendered violence and personal trauma were marginalized. Shree’s novel intervenes in this silence. Ma’s journey reclaims a personal history obscured by state-centered accounts.

Trauma theory further illuminates this dynamic. Cathy Caruth argues that trauma resists direct representation; it returns belatedly, demanding narrative articulation (Caruth 4). Ma’s early silence reflects this deferred confrontation. Only later does memory resurface, compelling her to cross the border physically and psychologically.

Marianne Hirsch’s concept of “postmemory” also resonates. Hirsch describes how later generations inherit the emotional weight of traumatic histories they did not directly experience (Hirsch 22). Ma’s daughter, though born after Partition, remains entangled in its aftermath. Their intergenerational dialogue demonstrates how national trauma shapes subjectivity across time. Shree thus reframes the border as both wound and bridge. It divides, yet it also invites return. The act of crossing becomes therapeutic—a narrative strategy for reworking unresolved grief.

### **Nation as Narrative Construct**

The novel repeatedly questions the stability of the nation. Bhabha reminds us that the nation is narrated into being; it is sustained through stories that claim unity while suppressing difference (Bhabha 145). *Tomb of Sand* challenges this coherence.

Ma’s cross-border journey disrupts nationalist binaries of self and other. Her affection for someone across the border complicates the idea of fixed enmity. The novel suggests that political boundaries cannot erase shared languages, memories, or desires.

From a feminist perspective, the nation often relies upon regulating women's bodies as symbols of honor and purity. Partition violence, as scholars note, frequently targeted women as embodiments of communal identity (Butalia 189). By foregrounding female desire rather than victimhood, Shree shifts the narrative away from symbolic martyrdom toward lived subjectivity.

The border, then, is revealed as performative—maintained through repetition, rhetoric, and militarized spectacle. Like gender, it persists because it is continuously enacted. Yet, as Ma demonstrates, it can be crossed.

### **Narrative Experimentation: Crossing Formal Boundaries**

Shree's narrative style itself transgresses literary conventions. The novel refuses linear chronology, instead weaving past and present in a fluid interplay of memory and imagination. The narrator frequently interrupts, digresses, and addresses readers directly, thereby dismantling the illusion of narrative stability.

Language in *Tomb of Sand* becomes a site of creative rebellion. Wordplay, repetition, and shifting perspectives create a textured linguistic landscape that resists easy categorization. This stylistic experimentation mirrors the thematic concern with crossing borders. Just as Ma crosses national lines, the narrative crosses formal and linguistic boundaries, unsettling fixed meanings.

The translation by Daisy Rockwell retains much of this playful energy, allowing the English text to echo the multilingual richness of the original. Translation itself emerges as a metaphorical crossing—an act of carrying stories across linguistic frontiers.

### **Intergenerational Dialogues**

Another boundary the novel destabilizes is that between generations. Ma's daughter, who initially embodies modern, rational sensibilities, struggles to comprehend her mother's transformation. Their interactions reflect shifting attitudes toward nationalism, feminism, and personal freedom.

Through irony and humor, Shree highlights the generational negotiation of identity in postcolonial India. The elderly protagonist emerges as unexpectedly radical, while the younger generation grapples with inherited anxieties. This inversion disrupts conventional hierarchies that equate youth with progress and age with stagnation.

### **Conclusion**

In *Tomb of Sand*, Geetanjali Shree does far more than tell the story of an elderly woman crossing a national border; she invites us to question why those borders exist in the first place—and who they truly serve. Through her layered, playful, and deeply moving narrative, Shree dismantles the rigid binaries that so often define our world: nation and exile, silence and speech, youth and age, male and female, past and present. What begins as a quiet story of grief slowly transforms into an audacious meditation on freedom, memory, and selfhood.

The border in the novel is not merely the line that divides India and Pakistan. It is also the invisible boundary within the self—the wall built from trauma, loss, and social expectation. By choosing to cross into Pakistan late in life, the protagonist refuses the confinement imposed by history and by those around her. Her journey is not just geographical; it is emotional and existential. In revisiting the site of her past, she confronts Partition not as a fixed historical event but as a living wound that continues to shape identities across generations.

What makes Shree's storytelling so powerful is her ability to hold humor and sorrow together. She approaches trauma not with solemn heaviness alone, but with wit, irony, and playful experimentation. Language itself becomes a site of crossing—sentences stretch, twist, and double back, mirroring the instability of memory and identity. This stylistic boldness reinforces the novel's central message: boundaries are porous. They can be redrawn, resisted, and reimagined.

Age, too, becomes a border that Shree challenges. The elderly protagonist defies expectations of passivity and decline, embodying instead curiosity, desire, and agency. Through her, the novel suggests that transformation is possible at any stage of life. Similarly, gender roles are unsettled, and silence gives way to speech as suppressed stories demand to be heard.

Ultimately, *Tomb of Sand* leaves readers with a quiet but insistent call to reflection. If borders are human constructs, then they are also subject to change. The novel urges us to examine the lines we have inherited and the ones we draw ourselves. In portraying acts of crossing as gestures of courage and remembrance, Shree reminds us that renewal often lies on the other side of fear—and that the most meaningful journeys begin when we dare to step beyond the boundaries that confine us.

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