Tomb of Sand: Transcending Barriers of Traditions, Nations and Genders

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Abstract

Geetanjali Shree is an Indian Hindi-language novelist and short-story writer based in New Delhi, India. She is the author of several short stories and five novels. Her 2000 novel *Mai* was shortlisted for the Crossword Book Award in 2001, while its English translation by Nita Kumar was published by Niyogi Books in 2017. In 2022, her novel *Ret Samadhi* (2018), translated into English as *Tomb of Sand* by Daisy Rockwell, made history by becoming the first novel translated from Hindi to win the International Booker Prize 2022 for fiction. Aside from fiction, she has written critical works on Premchand. This paper examines the challenges women have to face in order to rise above the obstacles of traditions, nations and genders in Geetanjali Shree's novel *Tomb of Sand*. It discusses what all it takes to be a woman in a patriarchal world and how individuals wrestle with societal beliefs, challenging rigid conceptions of what it means to be a woman. In this captivating novel *Tomb of Sand*, the author skillfully navigates the narrative to transcend the conventional barriers of traditions, nations and genders.

Keywords: Transcendence, tradition, gender, barrier, nation, identity, tomb, sand.

Geetanjali Shree's *Tomb of Sand* is a narrative that challenges and transcends traditional boundaries across multiple dimensions- cultural, national, and gendered. The novel, which won the International Booker Prize in 2022, repudiates to abide by the conventional constraints of genre, form and structure. The novelist presents a story that is fluid, nonlinear, and deeply entwined with the collective history of India and the individual lives of its characters. Not being bound by a rigid plot, the novel unfurls a tapestry of memories, dreams, and lived experiences. Through its innovative narrative structure and non-linear plot, the novel transcends traditional storytelling, which is typically linear and focuses on a linear storyline. Shree's use of language and storytelling plays a vital role in dismantling the barriers of language and national boundaries. The novel, which weaves together elements of Hindi, English and local dialects, highlights the fluidity of identity and the complexities of belonging to multiple cultures, underlining the idea that identity is not rigid and confined by borders. The novel's form itself challenges boundaries. Shree moves between different linguistic, historical and geographical realms, making the narrative fluid and borderless. The characters in the novel have been introduced by making use of Hindi terms as Ma (mother), Bade (son), Bahu (daughter in law), Beti (daughter) and Bua (aunt) rather than giving them some names. Shree has surpassed the borders of experimentation within Hindi literature. "She's breaking narrative conventions and testing the limits of her form," Rockwell, the translator of *Ret Samadhi* into *Tomb of Sand*, said, and "reinjecting it into the

Hindi bloodstream." This International Booker Prize winning novel is a celebration of border crossing in which literature borders as a bridge by being an English "love letter to the Hindi language" and the "line of meeting" of Hindi English Crowlese (a discussion amongst the crows expressing human feelings) thereby becoming a story that twirls and rolls and slips away from fixture.

The novel is divided into three parts: Ma's Back, Sunlight and Back to the Front. These parts are additionally subdivided into different chapters. However, this division is unusual since a number of chapters have numerous pages while others comprise a few sentences or words only. For example, chapter 74 in the second part of the novel contains two words only: "Rosie Died". This peculiar division demonstrates how Shree rejects and transcends the conventional constraints of form and structure. The book's division into three sections represents three stages of Ma's life – the first section entitled 'Ma's back,' focuses on her life following her husband's demise and her daily routine before that. The elderly mother "a woman so small she could slip through anywhere" is now a widow and mourning her husband's death (Shree 520). She has her back to the rest of the world and is by and large confined to bed, though she is not ailing. One fine day, she unexpectedly vanishes thus causing dread and anxiety in the family. Bade and Bahu (son and daughter-in-law, respectively) are overcome by extreme fear and panic; nevertheless, they are soon relieved when they find Ma at the police station, though in a peculiarly altered condition. They make up their mind to take Ma with them and take care of her once Bade shifts from his official dwelling after retiring from auspicious government service. But it appears that Ma has something else in mind. She chooses to go with her self-claimed bohemian Beti (daughter). And we see the end of the first part. *"No one noticed when the leaves changed the season of the heart yet again."* The first section of the book abounds with strong metaphors like walls, doors and windows, clearly indicating the borders between men and women. Ma, Bahu and Beti – the characters in the novel could be the mother, daughter-in-law and daughter of any Indian family, leading an everyday life, detained within the walls and doors of a house, 'invisible even in moments of stillness' (33).

The second section titled 'Sunlight' commences with Ma coming to Beti's house. The one sentence in the start, "this is the door that opens to reveal a world created by Beti alone" conveys everything (Shree 178). This part takes us through Ma's evolution into a new phase of life; Beti's transformation into a mother to her septuagenarian Ma, and her old mother becoming a young child demonstrates how the conventional roles have been reversed. Ma's decision to move in with Beti rather than her son is already a striking one in this culture, but just one example in this time where: "all of nature is plagued with confusion." One can hark back to a simple old order:

There was a time, they say, when all was fixed, and there was no zig, no zag. At least

that's what they say, it's up to you and me to decide whether or not to believe it. That

each human was safely ensconced in his or her own role in society and knew how to

behave with whom (96).

Even if that was ever the case, Ma no longer feels the need to play by the old rules and illustrates how individuals challenge stereotypes to forge paths of self discovery. After relocating to live with her daughter, the elderly woman started living her life once more. She slowly discovers space for herself to exist; Everything that she did not do at her son's home, she would do here. The life that "Ma's back" had been turned toward now had a brighter beam of "sunlight" shining upon it. Ma sheds her layers of obstruction and breaks through the shackles that society has put on her as a woman, as an elderly widow. Ma, who, throughout her life, is constrained by borders, ultimately overcomes them. As a woman there are so many boundaries and borders which she has to face at every phase of her life due to the patriarchal society but Ma goes beyond the bounds of her life to find her sweetheart by crossing the borders and for a change thinks about herself and becomes selfish as, "At eighty, Ma had turned selfish" (Shree 388). It is a story of a woman who suddenly becomes conscious of her needs and desires and decides to live on her own terms. The novel thus traces the transformation of Ma, who was just a tomb of sand, toiling for the family till eighty, deciding to fly away like the wishing tree.

Section three titled 'Back to the front', begins with Ma and Beti arriving at the Wagah border. Ma and Beti begin a new quest. They each have different objectives in mind. Beti merely desires to be at her elderly mother's side; Ma, on the other hand, has other plans. Jointly, they enthusiastically explore the area as their goals and twists build up. To her family's disappointment, Ma is adamant on taking a trip to Pakistan, to her roots with an intention to reclaim her identity as Chandraprabha Devi. Ma's travel is also a journey into her own self, opening doors and scaling walls, hitherto uncharted and simultaneously dealing with the unresolved trauma of her teenage experiences of Partition, and re-evaluating what it means to be a mother, a daughter, a woman, and a feminist. The heartfelt story narrates the life of an 80-year-old rebellious woman who crosses borders to confront an uncomfortable past while challenging stereotypes during her enlightening journey. Borders, for sure. No surprise, since the opening page promised, "This particular tale has a border and women who come and go as they please. Once you've got women and a border, a story can write itself" (Shree 16). Borders happen to be one of the author's own preoccupations and she contemplated borders of language, borders between men and women, between elders and those younger, between classes. The various partition narratives mentioned in this section, take the readers through the trauma of partition and Ma's past is slowly unveiled. Ma relives her early days and the agony of parting from loved ones. She rediscovers herself as Ali Anwar's Chanda. The story concludes with Beti leaping "out of the window, filled with longing" (Shree 541). In Pakistan, Ma has a conversation with a local interrogator who mentions:

> Your address is in India, which is very far from here.
> It is where it is, you're the one who's far, son.
> I'm from here, you've travelled here.
> No, son, I didn't come here. I left here. (462)

What Ma has to say about borders is that a border is for crossing. And this is what exactly *Tomb of Sand* is full of, the crossing and breaking through, physically and metaphorically, of borders, barriers, conventions, and traditions.

Tomb of Sand explores the theme of transcendence by portraying the female characters breaking free from traditional constraints, national boundaries, and gender norms. The novel investigates how characters navigate societal expectations, challenging norms that restrict personal and collective growth. This exploration encourages readers to reflect on the interconnectedness of individuals and the potential for unity beyond conventional boundaries. It construes the connotation of "borders" from a feminine viewpoint and puts it alongside the male-centric perspective of the term. The novel delves into the mother-daughter relationship, exploring the generational gap between them and their differing perceptions of gender, identity and history. It does not shy away from challenging the cultural traditions of India. Whether it's the protagonist Ma, a septuagenarian widow, questioning cultural customs or secondary characters challenging familial traditions, the narrative underscores the importance of a female's individual autonomy in breaking free from the shackles of long-established practices and about how they "forged a path towards the forbidden" (31). There are some courageous women who after all the gender-based biases and violence, still fight against this patriarchy like Beti who makes her own choices and follow her own choice of career path and has a separate love life too. Characters like 'Bade' (son) have differences with 'Beti' (daughter) on the basis of their ideology as she wants to outgrow the age old practiced patriarchal traditions and create her self-image. Narrator shows that Bade doesn't endorse Beti's "bohemian lifestyle" and her late night work and her love life and wishes to control her life as narrator reveals by stating, However, "as she got older, she had to be told what to do and what not to do. There is no question that an elder brother must signal his disapproval to his sister, joining forces with the parental tone. When his sister's lovers entered the fray, objections piled up, and Bade despaired" (Shree 44). Ma, unlike the character of Bade who was against his sister because she was daring enough to decide a self-governing and modern way of life for herself, gave some privacy in a way to her Beti by opening the window to her freedom. Ma is successful in creating a route to the forbidden. It was like the window that opens out towards the guava orchard. Ma had prepared this secret passageway clear for Beti's entrance and exit. There was a reverberating "No, absolutely not, she won't go out!" inside. And in the intervening period, Beti flew like a bird out of the open window (Shree31).

Ma who, throughout her life, is constrained by borders, ultimately overcomes them. Ma embarks on a journey of self discovery thereby defying the traditional roles that society expects women of her age and background to play. As a woman there are so many boundaries and borders which she has to face at every phase of her life due to the patriarchal society but Ma goes beyond the bounds of her life to find her sweetheart by crossing the borders and for a change thinks about herself. She is determined to find her ex-husband Anwar and so she decides to go to Khyber-Pakhtunkhwa where she resided as a young girl but has to leave as during partition of India in 1947, she was kidnapped but any how she fled from there and then came to India. After all this modern advancement, there is still gender based violence. As the story unfolds across diverse settings and landscapes, the female characters traverse national boundaries, emphasizing the fluidity of identity beyond geopolitical constraints. Ma, who in the end crosses every boundary, even the boundary of India Pakistan to meet the love of her life.

Tomb of Sand is the journey of a woman who defies all stigmas and stereotypes that society had once put on her, be it gender, class, or religion. Rosie Bua, a transgender, breaks the stereotypes of Hijra in the society who are known to earn through begging or sex work. She is a lovable character whose contribution to Ma's transformation cannot be disregarded although

Ma's bonding with the transgender Rosie, is viewed suspiciously by her own 'progressive' children.

In *Tomb of Sand*, female characters play a central role in transcending traditional, national and gender boundaries, offering an exploration of identity, selfhood, and liberation. In India, an older person is often portrayed as leading a drab existence, seemingly counting their days and struggling to assemble what little is left of their joy, hope and enthusiasm while recounting experiences—harrowing and joyful—that have brought them to this day. The protagonist, Ma, embodies a spirit of resistance against societal conventions, especially the expectations placed on a woman in her culture. Her journey is one of rediscovery and reinvention, as she navigates the complexities of aging, loss, and trauma. Ma's decision to leave behind the constraints of her household and embark on a journey to Pakistan, where she confronts the ghosts of her past, challenges the traditional roles assigned to women in her society. Her rebellion against the limits of widowhood, aging, and societal expectations is a poignant reflection of a woman's agency in shaping her identity, despite the confines of history, geography, and gender. Ma "flies in the face of convention," whether by spending more time with Rosie Bua or shedding her sarees or reaching out to Pakistan, a smaller household but that invisible binding remains – with it, its politics, its rules, the hierarchy, the anxieties of its roles, the entitlement of some people and the subordination by the same people, the snide remarks and gossip, and the surveillance. Especially that which is levied on the women: "if anyone lays a claim to [privacy], she is eyed with suspicion. What's she hiding, after all?" This feminist novel is centred around Ma and Beti, and Ma in particular and behind the scenes of family. It is a story about how the mother gave the daughter at least some privacy by opening "the window wide for her to leap out" towards freedom. And how she found the privacy of her own stirrings – amidst family duties, "breathing for them, feeling for their feelings, bearing their desires, carrying their animosities" – in the lullabies and goodnight-stories with which she rocked Beti to sleep, continuing to sing them even after, as though they were more for herself than her daughter – or for the child to sleep, and the mother to dream. It is the eruption and fulfillment of these hidden and buried dreams that is *Tomb of Sand*.

Shree got the idea for *Tomb of Sand* when an image took hold of her: the sight of an elderly woman, practically invisible to those around her. Shree grew curious about the woman's inner life. "Is that really someone who is sick and tired of life." This is what Frank Wynne, chair of the judges had to say about this novel "This is a luminous novel of India and partition, but one whose spellbinding brio and fierce compassion weaves youth and age, male and female, family and nation into a kaleidoscopic whole."
Tomb of Sand is a novel that intricately explores the transcendence of borders and genders. The narrative delves into the profound experiences of its characters, unraveling a tapestry of self-discovery and societal norms. It is a novel about the permeability of borders — between countries, religions, genders, languages, ages, life and death — is transcending linguistic barriers, despite the obstacles. Overall, this novel serves as a powerful exploration of the human spirit's resilience against societal constraints. In essence, it is a compelling exploration of breaking free from the shackles of tradition, transcending geographical boundaries, and challenging gender stereotypes in the pursuit of individual and collective liberation.
The concept of borders is not limited to geographical boundaries in this novel; it extends to the borders of identity and societal expectations. Characters navigate through these metaphorical

borders, challenging and transcending conventional notions of self and belonging. The novel invites readers to reflect on the fluidity of identity and the limitations imposed by societal constructs. Moreover, *Tomb of Sand* tackles the theme of gender transcendence, questioning and deconstructing traditional gender roles. The characters undergo a journey of self-realization, breaking free from the constraints imposed by societal expectations related to gender. The narrative unfolds with a sensitivity that explores the nuances of gender identity, highlighting the complexities and struggles faced by individuals who defy normative gender norms.

In essence, *Tomb of Sand* emerges as a literary work that goes beyond the conventional boundaries of storytelling. Geetanjali Shree artfully crafts a narrative that invites readers to contemplate the transcendence of borders and genders, challenging preconceived notions and fostering a deeper understanding of the complexities inherent in the human experience. Additionally, the novel brings together multiple voices of women from different generations, reflecting on the past and imagining futures that transcend patriarchal norms. These female characters are not confined to traditional roles but become agents of change, questioning and rewriting their narratives. Through these layered and dynamic characters, *Tomb of Sand* challenges the limitations placed on women by tradition, nation and gender, presenting a story of liberation and self actualization.

The story, centers around an elderly woman named Ma, touches on the global and historical forces that have shaped individual lives. Ma's personal story is interwoven with India's partition in 1947, a traumatic event that serves as a metaphor for larger struggles across borders and cultures. The novel delves into the emotional and psychological reverberations of the Partition, which transcends national boundaries, as its effects continue to ripple through generations in both India and Pakistan. In this way, the narrative goes beyond the confines of national identity, instead highlighting the universal experience of displacement, loss, and memory.

The novel also engages with the politics of language, especially through Ma's multilingualism, showing how language itself can transcend national boundaries and become a vehicle for both identity and liberation. The author's use of multiple languages, including Hindi, English, and Urdu, adds further layers of complexity to the narrative, reflecting the hybrid cultural identity that has emerged in postcolonial South Asia.

At the heart of *Tomb of Sand* is the character of Ma, a woman who is once a mother, a wife, a daughter, and an independent individual. Her journey reflects the questioning of traditional gender roles and expectations placed on women, particularly in patriarchal societies. Through Ma, Geetanjali Shree explores the shifting boundaries of womanhood, aging, and freedom. Ma's decision to embark on a journey to Pakistan in her old age, after her husband's death, is both an act of defiance and an assertion of her autonomy. This act challenges the societal norms that often view aging women as passive, quiet figures whose role is merely to uphold family and tradition.

The most remarkable way in which *Tomb of Sand* transcends barriers is in its refusal to neatly categorize its themes, characters, and cultural references. It explores the tensions between personal and collective memory, between the body and the mind, between history and individual experience. It critiques the ways in which societies create artificial divisions- whether they be between nations, genders or generations- and reveals the interconnectedness of all these

experiences. Shree's novel suggests that these barriers, while real, are not insurmountable, and can be transcended through empathy, understanding and storytelling. The narrator's fluidity in crossing between different worlds- physical, temporal, and psychological- mirrors the ways in which boundaries, even those that seem insurmountable, are constantly being negotiated and reshaped by human experience. *Tomb of Sand* also challenges the conventional notion of history as a linear, objective recounting of events. The novel foregrounds the subjectivity of memory, particularly as it relates to traumatic events like the Partition. History in the novel is not set of facts to be passed down unchanged, but a lived experience that is continuously refracted through individual and collective memory. This blending of memory and history further challenges the idea that national boundaries are fixed and unchanging, revealing the fluidity of both personal and national identities.

In *Tomb of Sand*, the relationship between Ma, Beti, and the transgender character Rosie Bua is significant in illustrating the shifting attitudes toward gender and societal norms. Rosie Bua, as a transgender woman, embodies a character that challenges conventional ideas about gender identity and societal expectations. The way Ma and Beti interact with Rosie Bua reveals the complexities of how gender and identity are perceived in their society. Ma's attitude toward Rosie Bua is initially marked by a mixture of curiosity, discomfort, and a reluctant acceptance. Ma, having lived much of her life constrained by traditional gender roles, is confronted with a character who does not fit within the conventional binary gender system. Rosie Bua represents a fluidity that Ma has not yet fully internalized, and this tension is part of Ma's larger journey of self-exploration and liberation. However, despite her initial unease, Ma is drawn to Rosie Bua, suggesting a deeper recognition of Rosie's humanity and individuality beyond the societal labels. Rosie Bua, in her role as a transgender character, challenges the characters' understanding of gender, and through their evolving perceptions of her, the novel explores how deeply ingrained societal norms can be questioned, transformed and transcended. In their different ways, both Ma and Beti's interactions with Rosie Bua reflect the shifting, complex nature of identity and the impact of personal growth and societal change.

Geetanjali Shree crafts a narrative that speaks to the possibility of transcending the boundaries of tradition, nation and gender. By exploring the complexities of memory, history, and identity through the experiences of a deeply nuanced female protagonist, the novel urges readers to rethink the ways in which we define ourselves and our place in the world. It is a story about freedom- freedom from societal expectations, from the weight of the past, and from the confines of rigid categories that often shape our understanding of the world. Through its inventive structure, thematic depth, and exploration of multiple identities, *Tomb of Sand* demonstrates that storytelling itself can transcend borders, offering new ways of understanding the complexity of human experience. While set in India, the novel also reaches beyond national boundaries. It explores the impact of colonialism, partition, and migration.

Ma represents a subversion of typical gender expectations. In a society where women are often seen as passive or defined by their familial roles, Ma chooses to challenge those constraints, asserting her autonomy in profound and symbolic ways. Her journey into the "tomb of sand", a metaphorical space of transformation and renewal, represents a break from the traditional roles assigned to older women. She embraces her sexuality, identity, and independence, pushing against the norms that limit the possibilities for women in patriarchal structures. The novel

explores the fluidity of gender roles and identities. Ma's transcendence of conventional gender expectations is not just an individual act but a broader commentary on the limitations imposed by rigid gender norms.

In conclusion, *Tomb of Sand* transcends traditional boundaries by blending cultural heritage with modern, global perspectives, and by focusing on the experiences of a woman who defies societal expectations related to gender, age, and national identity. The book encourages readers to think beyond the physical and metaphorical borders that shape human experience.

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