Breaking Silence and Borders: Language, Memory, and Feminist Rebellion in Geetanjali Shree's *Tomb of Sand*

Dr. R. Vijayalakshmi
Assistant professor of English
Sona college of Arts and Science salem-5
9994087088
vijiluxme345@gmail.com

Mr. S. Jayamohan
Assistant professor of English
Sona college of Arts and Science salem-5
9003502737
sjmjayan19@gmail.com

Abstract

Geetanjali Shree's *Tomb of Sand* (*Ret Samadhi*), translated into English by Daisy Rockwell, represents a transformative moment in contemporary Indian writing in English. Celebrated internationally for its formal innovation and thematic audacity, the novel challenges entrenched narratives surrounding gender, age, nation, and language. This paper offers a sustained critical reading of *Tomb of Sand*, arguing that the novel articulates a radical feminist and post-national vision through its portrayal of an elderly woman's late-life awakening, its reconfiguration of Partition memory, and its playful yet politically charged use of language. Drawing upon feminist theory, postcolonial historiography, and translation studies, the article demonstrates how Shree disrupts linear temporality, patriarchal authority, and linguistic hierarchy. The novel's refusal of narrative closure and its emphasis on movement—across borders, identities, and forms—position it as a representative and groundbreaking text in Indian writing in English between 2015 and 2025. This study contends that *Tomb of Sand* not only expands the aesthetic possibilities of the Indian novel but also demands a rethinking of how literature engages with history, aging, and freedom.

Keywords: Indian Writing in English, Partition Memory, Feminism, Aging, Translation Studies, Geetanjali Shree

Breaking Silence and Borders: Language, Memory, and Feminist Rebellion in Geetanjali Shree's _Tomb of Sand_

Introduction

The emergence of _Tomb of Sand_ in the global literary sphere marks a significant intervention in contemporary Indian literature. While Indian writing in English has long been dominated by narratives centered on youth, migration, and urban modernity, Shree's novel turns decisively toward marginal subjectivities—most notably, an elderly woman whose life appears, by conventional standards, to be nearing its end. Instead of closure, however, the novel offers renewal, resistance, and reinvention. Originally written in Hindi as _Ret Samadhi_, the novel gained unprecedented international attention following its English translation by Daisy Rockwell and its subsequent receipt of the International Booker Prize in 2022. Yet its literary importance cannot be reduced to institutional recognition alone. _Tomb of Sand_ unsettles dominant assumptions about who gets to be the subject of a novel, what histories are worth revisiting, and which languages are deemed globally legible.

At the center of the narrative is Ma, an eighth-year-old widow who retreats into silence after her husband's death. Her apparent withdrawal from life is gradually revealed as a threshold rather than an ending. As the novel memorably states, "Once upon a time there was a woman who lived behind a wall. Then the wall broke." This moment signals the novel's larger project: the dismantling of boundaries—between speech and silence, past and present, nation and self. This article situates _Tomb of Sand_ within Indian writing in English from 2015 to 2025, arguing that it exemplifies a decisive shift toward formal experimentation, ethical risk-taking, and multilingual imagination. Through close reading and theoretical engagement, the paper explores how Shree reclaims aging, memory, and movement as sites of feminist and political possibility.

Aging, Silence, and Feminist Awakening

One of the most striking features of _Tomb of Sand_ is its sustained engagement with old age as a space of becoming rather than decline. In literary and cultural discourse, elderly women

are frequently rendered invisible or reduced to symbols of sacrifice and endurance. Shree disrupts this pattern by placing Ma's aging body and consciousness at the heart of the narrative.

Following her husband's death, Ma withdraws into near-total silence. This silence, however, is not merely a symptom of grief or psychological collapse. It functions as a form of resistance—a refusal to continue performing the roles assigned to her by family and society. The narrative observes that Ma lies still "like a seed beneath the soil," suggesting dormancy rather than disappearance. The metaphor underscores the novel's challenge to ageist assumptions that equate old age with exhaustion and irrelevance.

Small but significant acts mark ma's eventual reawakening: her choice of clothing, her bodily movements, and her growing assertiveness. These gestures accumulate into a quiet rebellion against patriarchal norms that have governed her life. Feminist theorists have long argued that women's lives are structured around cycles of service and self-erasure; *Tomb of Sand* intervenes by imagining a late-life rupture in this cycle. Ma's transformation asserts that agency is not bound by youth and that freedom can emerge precisely where it is least expected.

Partition Reimagined: Memory Beyond Nationalist Frames

The Partition of India in 1947 remains one of the most extensively explored events in South Asian literature. Yet many representations of Partition rely on familiar narrative patterns: trauma, loss, and communal division. While *Tomb of Sand* engages deeply with Partition memory, it refuses to reproduce these dominant frameworks uncritically. In Shree's novel, Partition is not confined to the past; it resurfaces in fragments, desires, and unresolved longings that shape Ma's present. Her eventual journey to Pakistan destabilizes the fixity of national borders and challenges the idea that history can be neatly contained. The novel suggests that borders are artificial constructs sustained by fear and forgetting, while memory remains fluid and unruly.

Significantly, Shree reclaims Partition history through female experience and affect rather than through nationalist or communal rhetoric. Ma's recollections are intimate and personal, centered on relationships rather than political ideologies. In doing so, the novel aligns with feminist historiography that seeks to recover marginalized voices excluded from official

narratives. Partition becomes not only a historical rupture but also a lens through which the violence of patriarchy and nationalism can be interrogated.

Language, Play, and Narrative Experimentation

Formally, *Tomb of Sand* resists conventional realist storytelling. The narrative is nonlinear, self-reflexive, and frequently playful, moving between registers of irony, lyricism, and philosophical reflection. This stylistic unpredictability mirrors the novel's thematic commitment to freedom and disruption. The narrator often comments on the act of storytelling itself, reminding readers that stories are constructed, unstable, and capable of defiance. At one point, the text cautions readers not to expect obedience from the narrative, asserting that stories, like people, "have minds of their own." Such moments foreground the novel's resistance to closure and control. Language in *Tomb of Sand* is not merely a vehicle for meaning but a site of struggle and creativity. The English translation by Daisy Rockwell plays a crucial role in preserving this linguistic vitality. Rather than smoothing out the idiosyncrasies of the original Hindi, the translation embraces excess, punning, and rhythmic experimentation. This approach challenges hierarchical distinctions between 'original' and 'translated' texts and affirms translation as an act of literary authorship.

Friendship, Desire, and Queer Possibility

The relationship between Ma and Rosie represents another axis of subversion in the novel. Rosie, outspoken and politically aware, catalyzes Ma's transformation. Their bond defies easy categorization, existing somewhere between friendship, solidarity, and desire.

Importantly, the novel resists naming this relationship in fixed terms. This refusal destabilizes heteronormative frameworks that demand clarity and classification. Instead, Shree allows intimacy to remain fluid and open-ended, suggesting that connection need not conform to socially sanctioned models. The space between Ma and Rosie becomes a site of possibility where new forms of belonging can emerge. Such representation is particularly significant within Indian literary contexts, where non-normative intimacies have often been marginalized or rendered invisible. *Tomb of Sand* gestures toward a quieter, more expansive understanding of queerness—one rooted in companionship, care, and shared resistance.

Aging and the Politics of Visibility

A defining feature of *Tomb of Sand* is its refusal to treat old age as a period of narrative closure. In many literary traditions, elderly women are portrayed as passive, dependent, or peripheral figures. Shree subverts this convention by positioning Ma's aging body and consciousness as sites of possibility rather than decline. Ma's initial silence after her husband's death is often misread by those around her as withdrawal or incapacity. However, the narrative reframes this silence as a space of incubation. The text describes her stillness as resembling "a seed resting underground," an image that suggests latent energy and future growth. This metaphor directly challenges cultural narratives that equate aging with exhaustion and irrelevance. As Ma gradually re-enters the world, her choices—what she wears, where she goes, whom she befriends—take on political significance. Her late-life transformation disrupts patriarchal expectations that confine women's agency to youth or reproductive years. The novel thus aligns with feminist critiques of ageism, asserting that selfhood and desire do not expire with time.

Rethinking Partition Through Memory and Intimacy

The Partition of India has generated a vast body of literary and historical work, much of which foregrounds trauma, displacement, and communal violence. While *Tomb of Sand* engages with this legacy, it deliberately avoids grand historical narration. Instead, Shree approaches Partition through fragmented memory, personal longing, and emotional residue. Ma's recollections of the past are not organized chronologically; they surface unpredictably, shaped by affect rather than historical logic. Her eventual journey across the India–Pakistan border becomes a symbolic act that unsettles the permanence of national divisions. The novel suggests that borders, while politically enforced, remain fragile when confronted with memory and desire. By centering a woman's emotional history rather than nationalist ideology, *Tomb of Sand* offers an alternative mode of remembering Partition. The narrative emphasizes that historical events continue to shape lives long after their official conclusion, particularly for those whose stories have been marginalized within dominant accounts.

Narrative Form and Linguistic Freedom

Tomb of Sand is formally unconventional, resisting linear storytelling and stable narrative voice. The text frequently shifts tone, perspective, and rhythm, creating a narrative that feels fluid and unpredictable. This formal instability mirrors the novel's thematic investment in freedom and movement. The narrator often addresses the reader directly, drawing attention to the act of storytelling itself. Such moments disrupt the illusion of narrative transparency and invite readers to question how stories are constructed. The novel explicitly resists obedience to conventional form, suggesting that stories, like people, refuse to remain confined. The English translation by Daisy Rockwell plays a crucial role in sustaining this experimentation. Rather than domesticating the text for Anglophone readers, the translation preserves the novel's strangeness, humor, and linguistic play. In doing so, it challenges hierarchical assumptions that privilege original texts over translated ones and affirms translation as a creative, interpretive act.

Tomb of Sand and Contemporary Indian Writing in English

Within the broader field of Indian writing in English between 2015 and 2025, *Tomb of Sand* occupies a distinctive position. While many contemporary novels address globalization, migration, and identity politics, Shree's work distinguishes itself through its commitment to formal risk and ethical complexity. The novel's success also signals a growing recognition of translated literature within Anglophone literary markets. By challenging the dominance of English as the primary medium of Indian literary expression, *Tomb of Sand* invites a reconceptualization of Indian writing in English as a multilingual and transnational field. It demonstrates that translation is not supplementary but central to the literary ecosystem.

Friendship, Solidarity, and Non-Normative Intimacy

The relationship between Ma and Rosie introduces another layer of resistance within the novel. Rosie's outspoken personality and political awareness stand in contrast to Ma's earlier silence, yet their bond develops through mutual recognition rather than instruction. Their companionship becomes a catalyst for Ma's transformation.

Importantly, the novel does not define this relationship in fixed terms. It exists beyond clear labels of friendship or romance, allowing intimacy to remain ambiguous. This openness

challenges heteronormative and socially regulated models of connection, suggesting that emotional fulfillment can emerge outside prescribed structures. By foregrounding such a relationship later in life, *Tomb of Sand* expands the representational scope of Indian literature, offering space for alternative forms of belonging that are rarely acknowledged.

Tomb of Sand in Contemporary Indian Writing in English

Within the context of Indian writing in English between 2015 and 2025, *Tomb of Sand* stands apart for its commitment to experimentation and its ethical engagement with marginalized voices. While many contemporary novels prioritize global mobility and urban experience, Shree's work turns inward and backward, demonstrating that innovation can emerge from revisiting silenced histories and overlooked lives. The novel's international success also signals a broader shift toward recognizing translated literature as central to Indian writing in English. Rather than reinforcing linguistic hierarchies, *Tomb of Sand* encourages a more inclusive understanding of literary production as inherently multilingual.

Conclusion

Tomb of Sand is a novel that persistently resists containment. Through its portrayal of an elderly woman's late-life awakening, its reimagining of Partition memory, and its exuberant linguistic experimentation, the text dismantles entrenched narratives of gender, age, and nation. Shree's novel insists that freedom is not a destination but a practice—one enacted through movement, storytelling, and refusal. As a representative work of contemporary Indian writing in English, *Tomb of Sand* expands the aesthetic and ethical possibilities of the Indian novel. Its commitment to marginal voices, its embrace of translation as a creative force, and its challenge to linear history render it a crucial text for twenty-first-century literary studies. In breaking walls—literal and metaphorical—the novel opens new pathways for imagining identity, memory, and liberation. *Tomb of Sand* is a novel that persistently resists containment—by age, gender, language, or nation. Through its portrayal of an elderly woman's late-life awakening, its intimate engagement with Partition memory, and its bold narrative experimentation, the text challenges dominant literary and historical paradigms. As a representative work of contemporary Indian writing in English, *Tomb of Sand* expands the boundaries of what the Indian novel can achieve. Its insistence on freedom,

movement, and multiplicity makes it a vital text for understanding the evolving relationship between literature, history, and identity in the twenty-first century.

Works Cited

Butalia, Urvashi. *The Other Side of Silence: Voices from the Partition of India*. Duke University Press, 2000.

Gullette, Margaret Morganroth. *Aged by Culture*. University of Chicago Press, 2004.

Shree, Geetanjali. *Tomb of Sand*. Translated by Daisy Rockwell, Tilted Axis Press, 2021.

Spivak, Gayatri Chakravorty. "The Politics of Translation." *Outside in the Teaching Machine*, Routledge, 1993, pp. 179–200.