

**Geetanjali Shree's *A Tomb of Sand (Ret Samadhi)*:  
Translating/Traversing the Borders of Home and Exile**

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**Abstract**

Geetanjali Shree's *A Tomb of Sand* follows the odyssey of an octogenarian Ma slipping into depression after her husband's demise. It highlights several issues concerning gender roles, class, nationality religion and many others. This article brings forth how the tragic story is juxtaposed with magical realism using a playful tone. The work is a part of Partition literature diasporic experience of alienation and nostalgia is addressed in the intricate storytelling and intense characterization. The paper tries to explore how the physical and emotional travels turn as metaphors to reconcile fragmented identities in a world of loss and change.

**Keywords:** Partition, Border, Identity, Home, Language

Geetanjali Shree is the first Hindi writer to win the International Booker prize for her novel *Tomb of Sand* (2022) which was translated by Daisy Rockwell from her book *Ret Samadhi* (2019). She elaborately discusses about the invisibility of women in Indian spaces. She is an excellent observer of women's inner lives and her fifth novel deals with the aftermath of Partition. The tale also highlights several issues concerning gender roles, class, nationality religion and many others. The tragic story is juxtaposed with magical realism using a playful tone. Her writing embraces both beauty and ferocity of a sprawling geography. She is a

sensitive storyteller expressing women's catastrophe in man's world ranging from home-family to the community and region.

The author opens with drawing attention to the fictive world of meta modern novel. The short chapters of the novel emphasise mood and register shifts in the plot and characters. The tale moves from the sardonic to the tender, from magic to realism, from playfulness to mordant satire using an experimental tradition. The narration justifies as histories of colonialism uses no tone or mood in a deeply destabilised world, or/and, a postmodern world.

The plot follows the odyssey of an octogenarian Ma slipping into depression after her husband's demise. The central character reveals only her back in the beginning hundred pages of the novel. Motivated by her interactions with the transgender woman Rosie she embarks on poignant journey to Pakistan with her daughter. The aim is to meet and reconcile with the haunting scars of Partition riots. She reaches Lahore looking for ex-husband Anwar and finally reclaims her true identity to become Anwar Ali-Chandraprabha Devi. The novel is divided into three sections where the first is titled 'Ma's Back' and it delves on her life after her husband's death and her daily routine in her son, Bade's home. The second section titled 'Sunlight' begins with Ma entering Beti's (her daughter) house and concludes with her decision to travel to Pakistan. The final section titled 'Back to the Front' commences with Ma and Beti reaching Wagah border and elaborating on various partition trauma narratives. It concludes with Ma rediscovering herself as Ali Anwar's Chanda.

The title justly traces the transformation of Ma from merely a tomb of sand to a progressive mother. It also justifies the timelessness of women's interiority and the Indian story specially in Hindi and Urdu. The novel succinctly probes into the intricacies of human relationships and the lingering effect of past on present. The characters project how bodies and/are borders limit women's places which is constantly shifting and being created anew.

When Ma and her daughter cross the Wagah border into Pakistan, Ma is returning to her home soil. However, in Khyber, the two are arrested for crossing without a visa. Through Ma's gaze, a border of spaces for meetings, friendship, and love is revealed. Angry, bloodied lines that divide the geography cannot exist because a border has no religion. "It is meant to illuminate both sides." The metamorphosis of Ma and her response to the trauma of Partition is beautiful. It depicts all sorts of boundaries that is between genders, classes, family, religions, nations and even non-human communities through narration. Shree's stuttering narration works as a way of dealing with the myriad confusions of our contemporary world, where:

"chaotic never-before odd couplings [abound]. Speak of this then this is the story, blend these cells with those then another story. This story belongs to these cells, and if you join some of these cells with those ones, you'll get a different story. Join a belly with a back and get one story, a belly to a wall and get another, and peel the back away from the rest, and you get another and another and another." (Tomb of Sand, 123)

The novel is sprinkled with Hindi phrases, the English is broken and is poetic at times. French translator Annie Montaut reflects "The language was poetic, like a river – sometimes noiseless, sometimes gasping, and at times galloping. Some sentences were very long (a page or two in length) and some were no longer than a word. The voices also kept changing." (Tomb of Sand, 65) The writing is completely novel like the voices returned from the historical backdrop of the massacre are echoed in the violent Hindustani and Pakistani nationalist displays that occur every night on the Wagah border. The narrative is divided into three sections and each focus on a different stage of the protagonist's life. The writer also drops deep truths like: "Why are the only correct answers the ones you know?" or "You go where poverty takes you." (Tomb of Sand, 170)

In the beginning of the novel she offers the concerns, motifs and main characters of the story. There is also sardonic annunciation of death here. In the second chapter two there is non-realistic propositions of child's adventure story passing through borders leading to epic quest journey. Shree has strewn the story coupled with images, symbols, metaphors and poetry. Some chapters are merely few sentences and casual non-linear narration is a stunning compilation of scattered thoughts. She subtly in a sarcastic tone portrays the intensity of discrimination practised in Ma's house, "shouting is a tradition, an ancient Indian custom upheld by eldest sons" (Shree, 2022, p.45). Shree's buoyant prose, remarkable story telling makes it an exquisitely modern poet's novel. It venerates unconventionality, ridicules its own ingenuity and blurs the borders in language and life. In review it was that "in its linguistic contortions it evokes Don Quixote, in its discursive digressions it is reminiscent of Tristram Shandy, in its sense of the magical there are echoes of Jorge Luis Borges and Gabriel Garcia Marquez." (The Booker Library)

In the end Ma as a victim of partition deciphers the gloomy atmosphere of reunion in a post-ironical way during an interrogation by a Pakistani police officer. He reads Ma's name on her passport as Chandraprabha Devi and Ma claims that she is Chanda of undivided India.

[Officer asks] This name is not in your passport. [Ma replies] Chanda was sent off without a passport. [Officer asks] You have no visa. [Ma replies] Chanda was sent away without a visa. [Officer asks] Your address is in India, which is very far from here. [Ma replies] It is where it is, you're the one who's far, son. [Officer asks] I'm from here, you've travelled here. [Ma replies] No, son, I didn't come here, I left here. (Tomb of Sand, 628)

This novel falls into the genre of partition literature because it commences on borders and minces on partition trauma. The author sarcastically provides episodes on socio-political

issues in India – religious intolerance, communal riots, political manipulations, problems of minorities, environmental issues due urbanisation. The plot also touches on varied topics like Buddhism, women’s rights, ancient history, mythology and modern urban life. The story is grounded in truth rather than fancy and its realistic approach adds to the story’s intrigue blending with remoteness, proximity, sympathy and enmity. The fine tinge of humour and chatty style with multiple point of views makes it a significant work in Partition literature.

Daisy Rockwell’s English translation has liberally littered with Hindi and Sanskrit words without any effort or need. Shree’s work is famous for exuberant wordplay and the translator has carefully used the spirit and the shining energy. Onomatopoeia are casually employed whereas puns, multiple meanings and alliteration cannot be reproduced directly. There is a good rapport between author and translator which is described in the Translator’s Note. An excellent wordplay evokes an echo, a resonance and a zeal of the source text which results in arousal of joyful and sorrowful moments:

No one noticed when the leaves changed the season of the heart yet again. When the monsoon was at its peak. The leaves grew fat. Hanging heavy on the trees. They hung, dripping sadness. Even when they’re quiet they hang heavy. There’s beauty in their fullness, but there’s a core of grief, dark and deep. The raga of grief in slow tempo, extremely slow, a despondent alaap, a prelude. Or is it a vilaap, a lamentation? (Tomb of Sand, 175)

The novel is a celebration of art as a form and a cultural tradition which is packed with historical and literary figures, references of Bollywood song lyrics, richness of culinary delights. It invites to reader to comprehend these linguistic borders and relish a story packed with scents, flavours and tones of one’s home country. In the following lines the word ‘no’ is repeated incessantly, “No, no, I won’t get up. Noooooo, I won’t rise nowwww. Nooo rising

nyooww. Nyooo riise nyoooo. Now rise new. Now, I'll rise anew.”(21). Nikhil Govind rightly suggests in his review of the novel in *The Wire*, these digressions allow Shree to deal with the seriousness of Partition with “both distance and intimacy, empathy, and a (rightfully) cultivated alienation.”

Rockwell maintains the Indian flavour of language and mixes English and Hindi. She has successfully captured the ethos of Ma's home along with broken sentences, unstructured flow of words and retained the music and poetry of Shree's language. The translator had a daunting task to uphold the spirit of a book that abounds with images metaphors, layered with subtle sarcasm. Nevertheless, Rockwell has aesthetically succeeded in the recreation of the 'English dhvani' (p.735). Shree uses Hindi common nouns like “beti”, “bahu” and “Ma” for characters which has been retained in the translation. A huge number of essayists and references of Partition authors of Hindi and Urdu appear in the third section of the novel thereby vindicating their contribution to the literature. Her translation is twice the length of the Hindi original as she introduces more blank space, places to pause and reflect on for she says in an interview in *The Beacon* “A translation is an interpretation, a refraction, a reworking, and as such it contains something old, but also contains something new.”

Shree too adds in her interview after receiving International Booker Prize that “If you are a writer it becomes your way of being to have stories imbue your senses all the time and also to realise that everything is a story and everything tells a story.” She adds about her narration that “There are no real borders between characters (animate and inanimate) or countries or stories – this is pure, uninhibited language, shifting between prose and poetry, and even English and Hindi, as Rockwell litters the texts with the “occasional fragment of the original that was too good to leave behind.” Ma's journey of self-discovery and confrontation with her past are crossing the borders of limits which runs parallel with the process of translation and gendered body. In her essay titled, “On Butler's Theory of Agency” Adriana

Zaharijevic states that “the process of becoming a gender by the repetition of certain acts is “enacted through and with the body” (25). The agency possessed exists at the “juncture between our acts and the conditions that generate them” (Zaharijevic, 27).

The novel offers a profound exploration of diasporic longing and cultural fragmentation in its narration of home and exile. It acts as a rich site for analysing how diasporic identities are shaped by both geographical displacement and the cultural legacies that inform them. The notion of home as a physical space and as a metaphor for emotional and cultural belonging comes into being. Her quest to reclaim her sense of self from the shackles of colonial and post-colonial history depicts the complexes of diasporic existence. Journey from home to ancestral land is a broader exploration of exile where physical displacement is mingled with cultural fragmentation. The narration too is oscillating between past and present illustrating the search for meaning and continuity. The diasporic experience of alienation and nostalgia is addressed in the intricate storytelling and intense characterization. The physical and emotional travels turn as metaphors to reconcile fragmented identities in a world of loss and change. The personal and collective histories shape the dynamics of home and exile which serve as a poignant commentary of diasporic society. It is an interrogation on the relevance of borders defining gender identities, human and non-human worlds, familiar and strange, real and fantastic. Thus, the work is also a tale of the victory of humanity, inclusivity and plurality. The novel through exemplifying Ma demonstrates that “anything worth doing transcends borders” (Shree, 2022, p.12).

**Conflict of Interest:** The corresponding author confirms that there are no conflicts of interest to disclose.

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