

Beyond Borders: Geetanjali Shree's *Tomb of Sand*

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Abstract: The paper follows Geetanjali Shree's tale of criss-crossings across borders; borders that partition as much as connect, that cause grievous loss and terrible trauma but also facilitate healing, that becomes the site for reconnecting with the old as also for the forging of new bonds and relationships. Borders are not just points from where things start or end but from where one may move either way... forward and backward. As Shree narrates, her eighty-year-old Ma decides to journey backwards and grows younger/smaller by the day to reach where it had first begun to go wrong. For there, she believes, she can change it back and set things right, as it was or was supposed to be. While expressing the yearning to make the river of time flow backwards, Shree/Ma touches upon almost everything that goes on in the human, non-human, animal, inanimate, mythical, literary, traditional, contemporary, public, private, ordinary, and day-to-day worlds. The paper evaluates how Shree portrays the in-between-spaces of hybridity between opposing cultures, nations, religions, times, genders, and generations, in fact, what is beyond borders, where her protagonist acts out on her right to assume the subject position in the struggle for identity. The paper also explores how literature, history, and the literary writers, historians, and chroniclers of stories become her community, offering support and strength in her struggle to come to terms with loss, injustice, trauma, and tragedy.

Keywords: Borders, Gender, Partition, Violence, Trauma, Identity

The idea of 'borders' has come to be closely associated with discussions around negotiations of identity in multiple settings. Its most common usage is in the context of physical borders between nations/states and their implications on the projection/assertion of cultural and ethnic identities. It is also a popular metaphor for thinking about psychological boundaries individuals/communities

confront/cope with while acquiring/constructing a sense of self. At the same time, it also indicates the presence of social borders based on categories of gender, class, race, caste, sexual orientation, etc., all of which have a huge impact on identity formation and assertion. Since all the above are interlinked, these overlap to impact the invention as well as reinventions of individual as well as collective identities. The idea of borders thus has emerged as a metaphor loaded with meaning and potential for immediate recognition for writers, readers, as well as scholars of literature. The paper attempts to explore the juxtaposition and interlinking of borders as portrayed in the celebrated novelist Geetanjali Shree's remarkable latest novel.

With *Tomb of Sand* (2022), originally in Hindi, *Ret Samadhi* (2018), Geetanjali Shree created history and blurred the boundaries between the 'regional and the global' by winning, along with Daisy Rockwell, her English translator, the prestigious International Booker Prize in 2022. Significantly, the Booker committee honoured it as "an urgent yet engaging protest against the destructive impact of borders whether between religions, countries or genders" (Shree 2022). In addition, the novel touches upon an extensive range of issues. After all, as Shree said in her article, "Writing is Translating is Writing is Translating," literature is always "MORE than its content. It is structure; it is texture; it is cadence; it is rhythm." It is no wonder that *Tomb of Sand* is a tale with layers of themes and meanings and sudden twists and turns, making it quite challenging to summarise. Steadfastly located in hybridity, the novel is about the in-between spaces between opposing cultures, religions, nations, times, generations, genders, human/non-human worlds, and so on. It is writing itself can be considered an act of transgressing, a crossing of borders of language and culture. Even its original version does not maintain the 'purity' of the Hindi language. It has a fair amount of splattering of English, along with several sounds of emotions, feelings, and thoughts. Superbly translated into English, the novel arrived on the global stage to expand readership, winning accolades and literary and critical acclaim. As Shree portrays, there is a constant blurring of borders at multiple levels—between the public and the private, past and present, traditional and modern, human and non-human, male-female, and of the transgender, the mythical, literary, and the real. So much so that none of these

categories can be perceived without being aware of the simultaneous presence of the other; unifying all these elements is the eighty-year-old matriarch who grows younger when she goes beyond several borders. Defying the boundaries and lines of control governing national, cultural, and social practices, Ma unabashedly exercises agency to assume the subject position, thereby demonstrating feminine strength. Since this aspect remains dormant and hidden within, it is generally overlooked and ignored in the male-centric society. The paper focuses on asserting identity by refusing to be a victim of the injustice society and history have traditionally on women.

Tomb of Sand opens with its claim to be a tale that tells itself; it “has a border and women who come and go as they please. Once you have got women and a border, a story can write itself.” (11). After all, borders and boundaries are neither new nor rare phenomena for women. What makes the tale special is that Shree narrativises the discourse of protest through the rebellion of the ageing matriarch, who, for some reason, has decided to stop behaving as per the social conventions. As Shree also acknowledges in an interview, Ma reminds one of Bilkis Dadi of the 2020 Shaheen Bagh anti-Citizenship Act protest. What Bhasha Singh, the journalist (qtd in *The Wire*, 29 September 2020) remarked about Bilkis, “She is dadi, she is nani, she is an Indian woman, beyond the shackles of Hindu and Muslim,” can very well be used to describe Ma. Through Ma's story, Shree voices her response to contemporary life, particularly how the concepts of gender, class, nationality, and religion impact identity.

Ma registers her rebellion as devoid of anger and more as an ordinary and routine progression acting out through different stages. The novel's three sections underscore the three stages of Ma's protest. First, when recently widowed, she begins her protest. She lies facing the wall, with her back turned on everyone, refusing to eat or participate in accordance with her age and status. Her son, Bade, daughter-in-law, Bahu, and two grandsons, Siddharth and the one abroad, Overseas Son (for these are the names Shree gives to these characters), as also the servants are clueless about why she is no longer the caring self-effacing, easy-going, affable mother. They cannot fathom how she has turned so ‘selfish’ to refuse to heed everyone's entreaties or scolding. The second stage is when she

marches out of home on a trail to unravel the disappearance/murder of her old companion Rosie, the transgender, also known as Raza Tailor Master. Third is when she crosses the border to Pakistan to fulfil Rosie's last wishes and reconnect with her past relations. Through this twist in the tale, Shree reveals the trauma that Ma and many others in history were forced to undergo during the partition of India.

Shree thus lets her protagonist roam at will, crisscrossing multiple boundary lines voicing the feminine perspective, which usually is in contradiction with the dominant male view of things. In every section, Ma crosses borders, going beyond the conventionally established way of behaving. This complex tale's three loosely connected sections make for a difficult read. The first section explores the complexities of everyday life, the second the intricate relations of male, female, and transgender characters, while the third is about the shared trauma and loss experienced on both sides of the national border due to the historical event of partition. Shree thus puts together a series of counter-images across time, genders, and cultures to sensitively portray the impact of borders on identity.

The tone of this 'talking' novel, written more as if a narrator is chatting with a listener rather than a writer writing for a reader, is funny, satirical, and playful, almost giving away Shree's glee at a woman deciding to live life on her own terms and not as per the age-old sacrosanct social rules and regulations. Ma merely announces and then follows up in action a series of decisions that reveal her newly claimed freedom. When she finally gets up from her 'samadhi', she announces that she will no longer stay with Bade, the son, and moves in with her daughter, Beti, a journalist and an independent, modern woman living alone. Here, as Shree portrays, the roles get reversed; the daughter who so far has been so mindful of her personal space that she keeps even her boyfriend at a certain distance now is happy to let her mother in her personal space. However, used to staying alone, she finds the jingling sound of bangles coming from Ma's bedroom strangely disturbing. Perhaps this is because it makes her doubt her long-held belief that bangles should jingle only when she moves her hand while writing. In a reversal of sorts, Beti becomes the 'mother' to Ma. With Beti, Ma too begins to change and

recover her true self through simple, inane, everyday actions. She begins to follow her own routine, interacting with residents, servants, sellers, visitors at will, tending to plants, and birds, reconnecting with Rosie/Raza, as well as making friends with KK, Beti's boyfriend. Bade, the son and sibling watches sulking, but being a man, he is conversant only with shouting which he has inherited from his father. Hence, he does not know how to express his feelings in words. Tongue in cheek, Shree writes that Bade worries about Ma because he loves her, but also, because he needs her to sign the cheques. Yet surprisingly, he can talk to the crow who, as also the partridges, parrots, Garuda, bugs, dogs, elephant etc., appear as characters contributing to the action of the novel. The crow provides a glimpse into the feelings of Bade, Ma, and many other characters. In fact, there is an entire chapter devoted to an assembly of crows deliberating on the problem of global warming (374).

The novel thus displays elements of magic realism as Shree constantly blurs the lines between fantasy and reality, demonstrating, in Matthew Strecher's words in another context, "What happens when a highly detailed realistic setting is invaded by something too strange to believe "(267). In a similar vein, Sanket Kumar Jha locates the novel within feminist metafiction as it, to quote Patricia Waugh's widely quoted definition of metafiction, "self-consciously and systematically draws attention to its status as an artefact in order to pose questions about the relationship between fiction and reality" (Waugh 39). As Shree immerses the tale and the readers in the parallel, human, and non-human worlds, she also connects her writing with the past literary forms, most appropriately used in the tales of the Panchatantra. The crows, parrots, etc., exist alongside the humans as active participants in the action of the novel. Often, Shree uses the birds to jokingly pay her homage to the 'serious' feminist struggles and activism. Notably, there is "an elderly crowess with the heart of a poetess" who "had been one of the most badass feminists of her time, one who had fought and won the rights for mothers to attend meetings and also take part in community decisions" (378). Shree also refers to the centuries old tale of friendship between the Garuda and the Parrot narrated in the epic, Mahabharata. There are references to the great love stories of the region, such as Laila-Majnu, Shireen-Farhad. Shree thus recreates a holistic world, making the readers take notice of the birds and

animals they unconsciously share the world with. As such, she simultaneously connects her novel with multiple past and contemporary literary traditions, choosing thus to roam the hybrid spaces in between cultures.

The portrayal of Ma's obvious close bond with the transgender Rosie/Raza is rare in literature as Shree humanises those who are largely invisible in society. For hours, Ma and Rosie sit together chatting, and laughing, so much so that Beti is jealous, almost scandalised. The reality of community/society as a watching, policing, disciplining entity is rendered irrelevant as Ma establishes her own community with Rosie, sharing, laughing, applying beauty treatments, and getting clothes stitched by her other persona, Raza. Her circle of relations includes the crows, bugs, partridges, and other non-humans as well. Ma's idyllic world comes crashing down when Rosie the altruist is murdered by her tenants for greed and because they did not like a hijra residing in a neighbourhood of decent people. However, just as one expects the novel to be a tale about the problems faced by the transgender people, Shree puts the focus back on the women characters and the reality of geographical border between the two neighbouring nations. Ma, accompanied by Beti, embarks on a journey across the border to Pakistan. Now there is another twist as Ma or Shantiprabha gradually reveals herself to be Chanda of the past in love with and married to Anwar. Suddenly Beti realizes; Ma and not she is the unconventional woman with a secret past. Nor is, Bahu, Bade's wife who goes around wearing Reebok shoes with her sari. Bahu has her support system in her sympathising sons but otherwise is always jealous of Beti, and cribs endlessly about not being appreciated by her husband. Shree thus paints a realistic image of Indian families negotiating their roles, dealing with the boundaries of traditional stereotypes of identity but in this case, with the matriarch leading the rebellion against it all. Soon however, Shree returns to her theme of borders, this time, between the two nations.

With Ma deciding to journey to Pakistan, Shree portrays the disruption that redrawing of borders during partition of India caused in the life of ordinary people. The comprehensive impact gets magnified as Shree gathers around her narrative, numerous writers of partition including Khushwant Singh, Salman Rushdie, Mahadevi Verma, Intizaar Hussain, Manto, Krishna Sobti, Joginder Pal, Rahi

Masoom Raza, Bhisam Sahni, Rajinder Singh Bedi, etc. Shree records her presence among this august gathering thus compounding the values of positivity, humanism, and community, which every one of these stood for. There are references to various poets and musicians such as Bade Gulam Ali Khan, film personalities such as Ramanand Sagar, Madhubala, Dilip Kumar, and Amitabh Bachhan, etc. The community of literary writers and artists indicates alternatives to the existing political and 'official' solutions which have been quite useless and counter-productive to healing wounds of victims of partition. After all, as Shree writes, "Echoes and reverberations of melodies cross every border. Melodies change, music remains. Death comes, life goes on. A story is created, changes, flows. Free from this side to that." (682-83). Amidst it all, the requirement of a visa to visit her original home from which she, and numerous others were so violently uprooted effectively brings out the magnitude of injustice, indignation, and hurt experienced. Ma thunders, "Why should I have a visa? I never had before" (651), thus speaking up for countless victims of partition, women and children. After all, men have always fought wars, but women on both sides become the victim of violence, abductions, rapes, loot, plunder, and destruction. This has been the history of partition, and Shree, through Ma, goes on to voice the feminine perspective on the mindless creation of borders within the country.

In one of the most moving scenes, Ma delivers a speech on the topic of borders. Standing up with her cane spinning in her hand to enlighten the gathering of the Special officer Ali Anwar (also the son of Anwar, Ma's former husband), soldiers carrying guns, Nawaz Bhai, the sympathetic guard, "Four innocent murderers, some other bearded dudes," the crowd, and Beti, she says:

Borders? Do you know what a border is? ...It is something that surrounds an existence. It is a person's perimeter...However a border is not created to be removed. It is meant to illuminate both sides...A border does not enclose, it opens out...it enhances a personality. It gives strength. it doesn't tear about... (652)

Shree thus goes on to equate borders with heart, with love, 'ishq,' with fun, as a game rather than how it is projected every day as a display point for one-upmanship at the Wagah border. Ma/Shree, however, refuses to accept borders of hatred, for, after all, "There's only us. If we don't accept, this

boundary won't stay" (656). Shree thus subverts the concept of borders as she draws from the 'other' knowledge and wisdom that remains absent, silenced, and ignored. Shree writes, "the night of Chanda's and Anwar's tryst has not been recorded anywhere, neither in government records nor in personal diary." Shree's novel, however, records the beauty and honesty on display as Ma addresses the mute and paralysed figure of Anwar. There is no element of blame. In her refusal to assume the mantle of victimhood, expecting to be rescued by her man, Shree achieves the final blurring of boundaries of stereotypes of gender. Instead, she assumes equal responsibility for the way things turned out and goes on to claim agency, saying, "You didn't come,...I forgive you. I didn't come, do forgive me" (694). Though Ma's love story ends in tragedy, she gets shot and lies dead in the desert between India and Pakistan. Prior to that, however, she gets to have her say--to the silent figure of Anwar, as well as to everyone else. Partition, they say, has resulted in never-ending trauma that lies suppressed deep in the hearts of countless people. Years have gone by, but there has been no sense of closure since the event has been hardly talked about. Hence, while it cannot be achieved in a world continuing the path of polarisation, Shree does it in the world of literature. Ma's final words to Anwar contain the way out of the puzzle: to forgive and be forgiven, to survive, to go on living and not allow oneself to be confined, limited within borders. They must realise, "what happened was not our fault, but we must take responsibility. Forgiveness. The entirety of history and a personal experience all suffused in one word." (718). Shree thus suggests a way to deal with suppressed memory and the trauma of partition. Since the past cannot be altered, the only way forward is to recognise the injustice inflicted on the other by both sides and to forgive one another. Shree presents things as these are, as these should be, and as these can be. Above all, Shree, with her brilliantly narrated fable, demonstrates that the cultural history of inner life lies embedded in literature, arts, and music, which one must access to be sensitive towards society and to have a sense of self. History devoid of emotion and feelings is merely a record of dates and events, whereas literature and the arts provide the whole picture, an alternative having the potential to bring about positive change in individuals and communities.

To conclude, *Tomb of Sand* is a complex tale that employs multiple literary techniques, such as intertextuality, magic realism, irony, paradox, playfulness, etc., to create a narrative that questions and subverts several established notions. It critiques the ideas of borders as necessary for establishing religious, political, and social controls or as a point to claim superior differences from the other. Shree instead demonstrates how the woman is always surrounded by borders, but once she decides to go beyond, there is no looking back. She can re-script her identity and destiny. The numerous twists and turns and the chorus of narrating voices demand a responsible and tolerant reading of what otherwise is as fragmentary a narrative as a woman's life itself. However, all loose ends merge in the tale to leave a lasting impression long after the reading is over. To sum up, in Shree's words, "Sometimes when we read literature as literature, we realise that stories and tales and love don't always seek to blend themselves with the world. Sometimes they march to their own blend... But this is the world, it never lets up. The world is in dire need of literature because literature is a source of hope and life" (698). Shree's novel surely lives up to that.

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